



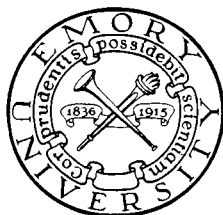
BY THE AUTHOR OF "VERA NEVILL" &c

# WORTH WINNING



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WORTH WINNING



# WORTH WINNING

A Novel

BY

MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON

AUTHOR OF "VERA NEVILL," "PURE GOLD," ETC. ETC.

"If it's bad to have money,  
It's worse to have none."  
*Nursery Rhyme.*



LONDON

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# WORTH WINNING



## CHAPTER I.

### FATHER AND SON

THE Honourable Harold Dorrington—only son of his father, and heir to his fine old name, his fine stock of family pride, his somewhat dilapidated old family mansion, and his very impoverished and heavily mortgaged estates—stands leaning against the open window in his father's library at Dorrington, with his hands in his trousers pockets.

Truth to say, the Honourable Harold looks exceedingly sulky.

He is a tall, broad-shouldered young fellow of seven-and-twenty ; he has crisp, yellow hair, and a well-grown and carefully tended yellow moustache ; and he has pleasant, round eyes, of a nondescript colour, which are not, it is said, without a certain fascination upon the fair sex. As a rule, people call Harold Dorrington a good-looking young man ; but on the present occasion it is doubtful whether



any one would endorse that favourable opinion upon his personal appearance.

A thoroughly ill-tempered expression seldom adds beauty to any face—and there is no doubt of it, that Mr. Dorrington just now looks as thoroughly out of temper as it is possible for a man to be. He stares at his boots, then out of the window across the garden, where his sisters are playing at lawn tennis, towards the park, and the meadows beyond, where the haymakers are hard at work, then he looks at his boots again and scowls.

“Understand me, Harold,” says Lord Dorrington, who is sitting a little way off in a heavy leathern arm-chair, pushed back from his writing-table,—“understand me, this sort of thing cannot go on any longer. I have paid your debts for you twice already; each time you have promised amendment, each time you have recklessly broken your word to me. I am not a rich man, as you know. I have all your sisters to provide for, and it is quite impossible that I can raise any more money on the estate. It is time that some of the consequences of your own folly and extravagance should fall upon your own shoulders instead of on mine.”

“I think they have done so, sir, already,” growled Harold, savagely.

“Because you have had to sell out of the army, you mean? Well, that strikes me as a very slight punishment indeed. You have exchanged a life of

idleness at Aldershot for a life of idleness at home, that is all."

"It is precious dull work here, I am sure; no shooting, no hunting for the next four months; nothing to do but to talk to a pack of silly girls."

"Your sisters are very good girls—very clever girls too, let me tell you, Harold. I wish my son had never given me any more trouble than my daughters have. However, that is nothing to the point."

Lord Dorrington turned to the writing-table and took from it an open letter.

"Here is a chance for you once more to clear yourself of debt and to open out a free and untrammelled future for yourself. Let me read you what my old friend Sir John Harrison says."

Lord Dorrington adjusted his spectacles on his nose, and turned over the pages of the letter.

Harold shrugged his shoulders impatiently and looked away out of window. Far off in the hayfield, perched upon a haycock, he could just discern a little patch of pink which represented something infinitely more interesting to his mind than Sir John Harrison's letter.

Just in front of the pink patch stood one of the haymakers, leaning idly on his pitchfork.

Young Harold's brow grew blacker at the sight.

"Confound the fellow!" he muttered under his

breath, and then roused himself to listen to what his father was reading.

“He says—he says. Ah, here it is! ‘Old Crocker is fabulously rich; he is one of the wealthiest iron-masters in Glasgow. He has now purchased a nice place on the banks of the Clyde, goes in for being a country gentleman, and makes no secret of his wish to marry his daughter well. The mother is vulgar, but Miss Crocker——’”

“*Crocker!* what a name!” ejaculated Harold.

Lord Dorrington raised his eyes reprovingly at his son for an instant from over his spectacles, and went on reading the letter.

“‘Miss Crocker is well educated and has good manners. She is not exactly pretty——’”

“No, of course not! as if heiresses ever were! She is hideous. I can quite imagine the sort of woman—fat, snub-nosed, sandy-haired. She probably squints, and she is undoubtedly past thirty! My dear father, I really can’t marry a woman of that description!” And Harold laughed a little as he sauntered away from the window and sat himself down on the edge of his father’s table, still, however, reserving to himself a view of the patch of pink in the distance upon the haycock.

“Will you have the kindness to listen to me until I have done reading, and not to interrupt me again?” said his lordship with dignity, and went on with the letter. ‘Miss Crocker is not exactly pretty, but

she is refined and ladylike-looking, and is quite young. She is not at all objectionable in any way. I am sure that Harold would have a very good chance—in point of fact I have just mentioned his name to the old man, and he seemed quite taken with the idea; he told me that birth and not fortune was what he desired for her. So now, like a good fellow, pack off that young hopeful of yours to me directly, and I will take him over to Fearn Castle to be inspected by the heiress. Tell him it is a most comfortable house to stay in, both wine and cooking perfectly irreproachable.’ So now, Harold,” said his father as he folded up the letter, “you had better make your preparations to start to-morrow, and I will write to Harrison to-day and tell him you are coming.”

“It is quite impossible!” cried Harold, excitedly “I don’t want to marry at all. You can’t force a fellow to marry against his will! And—and I don’t want to leave home just now.”

“Why not, pray? I thought you said it was so dull at home. What possible reason can you have?”

“Oh, none at all!—of course not, my dear father,” interrupted Harold, quickly, and there was something like a blush upon his face. “No particular reason, of course—how could there be?—only—Miss Crocker and her money may go to the devil! I don’t want her! It is quite impossible for me to tie myself up to a wife at my age—quite impossible, and utterly absurd!”

"Then I regret to say, Harold, that *I* shall find it equally impossible and absurd to pay this little schedule of accounts which you have obligingly brought to me, amounting, I think you said, to three hundred and thirty-nine pounds;" and Lord Dorrington made a semblance of referring to some papers on the table before him.

Harold paced irritably up and down the room once or twice in silence. His father leant back in his chair, and watched him with a cynical smile upon his face. He was a handsome old man, and had probably been not unlike his son at his age. He was still straight and erect of figure, and had fine clearly-cut features, and clever, though somewhat cold, grey eyes. His hair and short-trimmed whiskers were white; and, although he was sixty-five, he hardly looked his age.

Harold stopped suddenly short in front of his father.

"Of course, sir, you have the whip-hand of me about those confounded bills," he said, sullenly.

"I wish you would break yourself of that trick of putting your hands in your pockets, Harold. Your mother does so object to it. Yes, of course, my boy, I have what you call the 'whip-hand' of you. Fathers usually have that slight advantage over their sons. What train will you go by, my dear boy?" And Lord Dorrington, who had drawn his blotting-book towards him, now dipped his pen into the ink, and began to write.



Harold looked despairingly out towards the hay-field, where the pink patch had just got up off the haycock, and was moving away across the meadow in company with the man with the pitchfork.

"Any train—oh, say the last!—the night train; that will give me more time;" and he made for the door.

"Wait a minute," said his father, and Harold came unwillingly back.

"You quite understand what I wish you to do, Harold?"

"I suppose you want me to marry this woman?" said his son, sulkily.

"If possible. Don't mistake me, my boy. I don't want to force you to do so, if you don't find you possibly can; but there can be no harm in your seeing the girl and trying to like her. If you are to go there prejudiced against her, and determined to find fault with her, you might just as well stop at home. But remember that a rich marriage will simply be the salvation of you, and will stave off a crash which must inevitably come in your day if it does not in mine. My affairs are frightfully entangled, and your extravagance and folly have helped considerably to involve me in still further difficulties. I will not appeal to you for my sake, but for your own. Some day, Harold, you will be thankful if you have taken my advice in this matter. I don't want to bind you down to do anything repulsive to you, but if you find

the girl is what Harrison says she is, ladylike and well educated, promise me that you will do your best to win her—give the thing a fair trial. That is all I ask of you. If you will do that—will meet me half way—I too will deal fairly by you, and will not be hard on you if you should fail.”

“You are very fair to me, sir,” said Harold, humbly; and indeed it would have been impossible for him not to be melted by his father’s frank and kind manner. Lord Dorrington always knew how to manage his children. He won his battle first, and then he showed mercy, and was temperate in his victory.

“Is it a compact, then?”

“I will do my very best, father,” said Harold, whose mood now had changed into one of submission and filial duty; “but—but—I had sooner be hanged than be married.”

Lord Dorrington laughed softly

“The world, my dear boy, I have always heard, is divided equally into two classes. To the first belong those who had rather, as you say, be hanged than marry; to the second, those who had rather marry than be hanged. It comes to the same thing in the end, you know—the alternatives are possibly tolerably equally balanced—still I should advise you to reconsider your selection.”

“I don’t believe you are a bit more in love with Miss Crocker than I am,” laughed Harold, to whom his father had once more resumed his ordinary manner,

a manner which created a singular sympathy between the stronger will and more practical mind of the older man, and the easy-going and somewhat weak character of the younger.

"No, I am not in love with Miss Crocker, though I have no doubt she is charming," rejoined the father; "but *les beaux yeux de sa cassette*, my dear boy; pray bear them in mind—remember, where our interest lies, there will our heart soon follow. Now go and find your sisters, Harold; they have been calling out to you to join their game for some time; and here, put this letter into the bag in the hall as you pass, please."

He held out the letter which, talking still as he wrote, he had now finished and directed. It was addressed to Sir John Harrison.

Harold took it with a grim chuckle at his own expense, and dropped it, as he was desired, into the letter-bag in the hall, and then strolled out on to the lawn, feeling dimly conscious of having been thoroughly worsted, and of being somehow pledged by the writing of that letter to do something infinitely more than either he desired or deserved.

"Hurrah, here comes Harold!" cried Augusta, as he appeared sauntering round the edge of the flower-garden.

"Play on my side, Harold," called out Louisa, the second.

"Harold looks worried," said Alice, the youngest,

and his own particular favourite of the three. "Don't ask him to play if he had rather not."

"All right, Pussy, I'll play with you," answered Harold, cheerily.

But as he took up his racket and posted himself in his proper "court," Harold Dorrington heaved a big sigh over the hardness of life in general, and over his own particularly hard fate therein, and he thought with melancholy regret of a small person in a pink cotton frock.

He missed his first ball.

"All that is at an end," sighed Harold, half aloud. But he was by no means alluding to the ball.

## CHAPTER II.

## A LOVE TRYST

THE same evening about nine o'clock—a warm, balmy summer's night, sweet-scented with the odour of the June honeysuckles on the hedges, and musical with the June nightingales in the neighbouring elm-trees—the door of a cottage in Dorrington village was softly pushed open, and a little figure, clad in pink cotton, to which allusion has been made in the previous chapter, stepped softly out in the twilight.

“Where are you going, lass?” called out a shrill voice from within the lighted cottage.

The girl stepped quickly back into the sheltering doorway.

“Only just up to the shop, mother. I thought I'd match the pink ribbon for my Sunday bonnet, and then maybe I'd step up to the vicarage to ask Mrs. Lane for that bit of plain needlework she promised to give me.”

“You spend too much of your money in ribbons, child,” grumbled the old voice from within; “but there, go along with you, and don't you be long. Your father don't like you to be running about late



over the village, like them common Barrett girls—and all the haymakers about, too. Don't you go by the 'George,' Rosie."

"No, mother:" and once more the girl stepped forth, closing the cottage door softly behind her. She stood an instant outside in the dusty road, as if uncertain which way to turn, and glanced up at the church tower just across the bridge down the village street. It was too dark to distinguish the clock, but as she stood and listened, the hour of nine suddenly rang out into the silent night.

"Just nine," whispered Rosie, below her breath.

Down the road stood the little rows of cottages on either side, each with its patch of warm light streaming out through the unshuttered lattice windows, and just by the bridge a great flood of red radiance from the wide-opened doors of the "George;" and there was a distant hum of the loud revelling voices within—coarse and hearty, as labourers' voices are.

Rosie shuddered.

"I suppose father is there!" she said to herself, "and David. Oh, how can any girl take a sweetheart like that, I wonder, who sits drinking beer and smoking half the night! How horrible it must be! and yet that might have happened to me—if—if—I did not know of something better!"

She turned away, and began walking rapidly from the village and the coarse sounds of homely revelling which disgusted her so much—away along the silent

country road towards a great belt of dusky woods that lay before her.

The evening glow—primrose and amber still with the lingering glory of the midsummer sunset, and the frail outline of the semi-transparent moon just shining faintly upon the pale-tinted sky—lit up somewhat the face of the girl as she walked. A face lovely as a Hebe's—dark-eyed and red-lipped—glowing with all the colours of youth and health, and crowned with a thick, dark mass of clustering hair—a soft, lovely, voluptuous face, yet with a certain amount of character and determination withal, despite the smooth, rounded outlines and the rich southern colouring.

Above the pink cotton dress, neat and plain as a village maiden's, yet dainty and well-fitting as any lady's, Rosie Wood had flung a white woollen shawl, which arranged itself with a natural grace and coquetry about her head and shoulders, and out of the soft folds of which her lovely face gleamed forth like a jewel in a silver setting.

Rosie walked quickly, glancing up at the moon's pale crescent as she walked.

"I am late!" she murmured to herself. "But there's no harm in that. He will be there first, and it's always best that the man should be the one to wait."

Not half a dozen seasons of London drawing-rooms could have taught Rosie Wood more than she knew

intuitively on certain subjects all-important to a woman. She knew it by a sort of natural woman's wit that must surely have been born with her, since she could not have learnt it in her father's cottage.

Presently she reached the belt of wood, and jumping lightly over a low stile, followed a narrow footpath for a few hundred yards till she came upon an open space cleared among the trees. Away across the low, flat meadows, where all the hay lay spread out, the white walls of Dorrington Hall could be just seen gleaming faintly in the evening light.

As she reached the clearing, a man who had been leaning against one of the dark tree-stems started hurriedly forward to meet her.

"Oh, Rosie, how late you are! I began to think you would not come to-night. What has kept you?"

"Am I late? I did not know it. I walked slowly, I suppose. Mr. Dorrington! don't do that!"—wrenching herself away from his suddenly snatched embrace. "If you do not behave yourself, I will go."

"How often have I told you not to call me 'Mr. Dorrington,' Rosie?" said the young man, unabashed, as young men frequently are by such rebuffs, and drawing the lovely face down upon his shoulder.

"Well, then, Harold, if you like it better."

A moment's silence.

The nightingales sang on in the tree-tops, and all the little leaves in the wood fluttered in the soft breezes

of the summer night. Just for that one minute the lovers were quite happy.

Then Harold spoke, and this poor, silly little fool's paradise was broken into, and marred for evermore.

"Oh, Rosie, my darling; I have such dreadful news for you!"

The dark, curly head, from which the woollen shawl had fallen back all disordered, raised itself quickly from his shoulder.

"Rosie, my pet! I am afraid it will make you very unhappy," said the young man, with a real disturbance in his voice. "I can't bear to say anything to cause you pain."

"What is it?" she said quickly, almost sharply.

"I am going away to-morrow. This time to-morrow I shall be gone."

"Is *that* all? You will come back again, I suppose? Where are you going, sir—Harold, I mean?"

Harold groaned. He felt absolutely heart-broken for the moment. It did not seem to him, as he stood in the summer twilight with this lovely girl, as if life without Rosie Wood would be worth having. Whatever the girl felt, the man at least was sincere.

"Oh, my darling, if that were all!" he said, wondering how he was to tell her, and still more how he was to leave her.

"What then? But you need not tell me, for I can guess. Your father has found us out, and you are to be sent away from me, and you are told to give me up.

If that is all, I suppose you are a man, sir—you are not afraid of sticking to your word? You will go away for a time, and then, when the old gentleman dies, you can do as you like, and come back and marry me.”

Harold shook his head.

“No, it is not that,” he said, and was silent for a minute, not through distress of mind this time.

Truth to say, it grated against his sensitive feelings to hear the glib way in which his Rosie—his gentle village maid, his sweet wayside flower, as he called her to himself—talked about the “old gentleman” dying. It was rather jarring to him, for he was both fond and proud of his father.

“You make a mistake, Rosie,” he said, gravely, and somehow he unconsciously removed his arm from her waist; “there is no ‘finding out’ in the matter. My father wishes me to go to Scotland to-morrow night, to stay with a friend of his near Glasgow.”

“Yes? Will you bring me back a cairngorm brooch and ear-rings? They come from Scotland, don’t they.”

Harold laughed, and put his arm back round her.

“What a dear little goose it is! Of course, I will bring you cartloads of cairngorms if you like those big vulgar stones—not that I need go to Scotland for that.”

“Then, what are you going for?” persisted Rosie, who was dimly aware that there was more to be told,

and who had brought in the cairngorms with no other object than to replace herself upon the vantage ground of her lover's caresses, which her previous speech had forfeited.

Harold stroked the little head and kissed the soft red lips once more ere he answered her.

"Rosie, it is no use hiding the truth from you," he said, at last; "the fact is, my father is sending me to Scotland to—to try and marry a young lady there who is very rich."

A moment's silence. All unseen by the young lover, there flashed across the girl's fair face a sudden scowl of rage, that fled away, leaving her white as the pale moonlight fast flooding the fields before them.

"What is she like?" was her thoroughly feminine question.

"Hideous, probably; she cannot be so lovely as my Rosie, at any rate."

"You are going to marry her, you say?" in a voice of suppressed calmness.

"I promised my father I would try."

"What do you mean by *try*? You will ask her, I suppose, and of course she will say 'Yes.' Is that what your *trying* means?"

"It doesn't at all follow," said Harold, with a little laugh that was not altogether free from self-complacency. "She is rich, you see, and I am poor. But it is sad, is it not, Rosie, that if she *should*, by ill luck, have me, you and I shall have to part, my

little love? We have been very happy, haven't we, but——"

This time it was Rosie who withdrew herself suddenly from her lover's arm.

"Mr. Dorrington, I don't understand you," she said, suddenly, looking up at him; and there was a ring in her voice and a glitter in her eyes which Harold had never known in her before. "Nothing can be easier for you than to refuse to have anything to do with this lady. When a gentleman has promised to marry one woman, it is no longer possible for him to ask another to do so."

"Well, but, Rosie, of course I've always said I would marry you, and on my soul I have always meant to some day, you know; and you don't suppose I want in the least to marry this woman or any one else. I'd far rather it was you. Still, all the same, you must see it would be not quite the right thing, perhaps; there are my mother and my sisters to think of, and——"

"There's nobody to be thought of but you and me—nobody!" interrupted Rosie, sharply; "and if you are going to break your word to me, sir, it will be the worse for you."

Nobody likes to be threatened; more especially is that method of warfare distasteful to a young gentleman who has foolishly become involved in a love affair with the daughter of a labourer upon his father's estate.

Harold turned away, angrily

“You are a little fool,” he said, roughly.

“Not such a fool as you suppose,” answered Rosie.

“Have you forgotten that you wrote to me a year ago, promising to marry me? I have it in black and white, Mr. Dorrington—in your own handwriting.”

“You have never been so insane as to keep my letters?” cried Harold in dismay.

“I have kept *that* one,” answered Rosie, significantly—“and I mean to keep it.”

For the first time it struck Harold Dorrington, with the sudden shock of a painful discovery, that this sweet village maiden of his, this beautiful young Hebe of his dreams, had something about her that was panther-like, and might show her claws unpleasantly some day

He laughed a little nervously.

“Do you mean to bring a breach of promise against me, Rosie?” he said, with an attempt at an ease of manner which he did not feel.

“Do you mean to bring me some cairngorms from Scotland?” was the rejoinder prompted by her ready woman’s wit. Rosie felt possibly that she had pushed matters far enough. Her *ruse* succeeded. Harold, who loved peace and a quiet life, and still more, kisses from rosy lips, drew her near to him again, thankful for the change in her mood.

“I think you are very jealous, my little witch!”



"Well, and isn't it natural, sir? and arn't you just jealous of David Haythorn?"

"Yes, that reminds me," said Harold, with dignity; "I must forbid your talking to that man; he was standing by you for ages this afternoon when you were in the hayfield. I saw you from the window; a great rough common labourer like that; I wonder you can like to have him near you!"

"Well, and am I not a labourer's daughter?" said Rosie, with a little pout, "and would it not be quite right and natural that I should marry him?"

"But you *won't* marry him, Rosie?" cried Harold, entreatingly.

"Not if you say *you* will marry me," said Rosie, sweetly and archly, with her pretty head on one side.

Who says that Circes are the product of an artificial state of civilization?

Harold Dorrington fell into the trap instantly, with a readiness and a blindness beautiful to behold.

"Of course I will marry you some day if you are a good little girl——"

"And you won't marry that horrid, ugly, rich woman up in Scotland?" whispered Rosie; and as she spoke her soft, rounded arms, from which her open sleeves fell back, crept gently up round his neck, and her warm, smooth cheek nestled up against his chin; and there was the moonlight, and the nightingales, and the scent of the lime-trees, and heaven knows how many other subtle influences about him

to make this poor young fool lose his head; and so Harold Dorrington, as nine out of ten other young fellows in his place would have done, did lose his head. He held the sweet yielding figure to his heart, and swore by all his gods that he would marry Rosie Wood and none other woman upon earth, and ratified the vow by a hundred kisses pressed hotly upon the sweet mouth she held up so close to his.

And so they parted.

"I will be true to her, poor little woman; she loves me, and I will not behave like a blackguard to her," said honest-hearted Harold, as he strode away across his father's park towards the Hall.

And at the self-same moment, Rosie, hurrying back down the dusty highroad towards her home, was saying to herself:

"Poor, silly fool! I can do what I like with him. Ah! it isn't for nothing that girls are given such good looks as mine. I can twist him round my finger. There's no rich lady in the land as shall stand between me and Dorrington Hall! I shall manage to keep him, though it will be hard work; but it's worth it. Lady Dorrington—Lady Dorrington! How well it sounds. Rose Dorrington!—and there won't be a better looking lady in the county than me! I frightened him about the letter, too; he will always believe in that. What a pity I haven't really kept it! but it doesn't matter, I can keep him in order

with the fear of it. How soft men are, to be sure, when they are spoony on a girl!"

With which final sapient remark Miss Rosie pushed open her cottage door.

"What a time you have been, child!" said her mother, as she entered. "Did Mrs. Lane give you the work?"

"No, mother; she kept me waiting ever such a while in the kitchen, and then sent me word it wasn't ready."

Rosie was unwinding the white shawl from about her shoulders, and though her back was turned to the old woman, who was busy laying out the homely supper, there was no tell-tale blush upon her lovely face as she uttered this lie. Rosie belonged to that class of women—and they are not confined to cottages—to whom a lie comes with almost less effort than the truth.

## CHAPTER III.

## MAY CROCKER'S VIEWS ON MARRIAGE

A WIDE, white current bounded on either side by blue and purple mountains—the jagged peaks of Arran in the distance, the straight line of the open sea beyond. Soft, wooded slopes creeping down to the water's edge, where the brown rocks are just left bare by the tide, and out upon the stream a silent multitude of ships coming and going ceaselessly up and down. Heavy laden coal barques, black-sailed and grimy; stately merchantmen, creeping slowly up to the great city beyond with their treasures from every land; little yachts, with white sails set like the outspread wings of the swan; and red-funnelled steamers in countless numbers ever passing backwards and forwards, hurriedly and noisily, in a never-ending procession upon the great highway of the water thoroughfare.

This is the scene that May Crocker looks out upon as she stands by the window in her father's drawing-room, leaning idly against the painted and gilded shutters with all the heavy magnificence of the sumptuously furnished room behind her.

By no means a beautiful girl—there is not a feature in her face that is good—she is not even a striking-looking girl. She is rather under the middle height, and there is nothing either of dignity or of special elegance in her figure, only a certain subtle refinement of outline which you would not perhaps notice when you were with her, only remember vaguely after you had left her.

Not pretty, not handsome—what is there about May Crocker that makes you look and look again, until you feel as if you could never tire of looking at this girl?

Her head, with its covering of smooth brown hair, is small and well made, her foot is perfect, and her hand is soft and white and plump, with little dimples at the knuckles, which a man might long to kiss, and with tiny blue veins and deep pink shadows, such as one sees in Rubens' pictures. When you have said that, you have said all there is to say about May's claim to actual beauty.

And yet she is charming; this girl, whose father is an ironmaster, and whose maternal grandmother once dealt out lemonade and whisky from behind the bar in a gin palace in the great city of Glasgow hard by; and not only charming, but redolent of that sweet, undefinable essence of grace and refinement which surrounds some women with an ever-fresh magnetism, a never-dying fascination. There is a beauty in her every movement, in her smallest action. Her

blue eyes are neither large nor lustrous, nor long-lashed, but when they look at you the soul within her shines out through them. They look sad, or tender, or mirthful, or mischievous, just as you, who are talking to her, would wish them to look. It is the same with her mouth: when at rest it is rather a pretty mouth, but when it laughs it is too wide; but then, her laugh! did any one ever hear a sweeter laugh than May's? It is never too loud—it is never a mere senseless giggle—it is, like her voice, perfectly modulated, and she never laughs in the wrong place.

May is not a specially shy girl, nor is she overburdened with a ridiculous amount of modesty; she says out what she thinks, boldly and unflinchingly, with little flashes of audacity, and little flashes of temper, too, sometimes; and yet there are occasions when sweet sudden waves of rosy colour come flushing up all over her face, covering it with an unwonted confusion, at which she herself is half annoyed and half amused, but which is a sufficiently delightful sight to the man who has been fortunate enough to call it forth.

My readers, I want you to love May Crocker. How she comes to be what she is—being the daughter of rich, worthy people, of scanty learning, and of pretentious manners, and having had no better chance of improvement than the education afforded her by what her father calls a “tip-top” Brighton boarding-school

—I am at a loss to explain. Her grace, her refinement, and all her loveliness, come to her, probably, like Rosie Wood's wondrous beauty, as a gift straight from Heaven. There was nothing of inheritance in either case.

From her father, May derived perhaps the clear judgment and clever common sense which helped to make her conversation as charming as her manner—but surely nothing else.

So May Crocker stands at the window and looks out, as she has done hundreds of times before, at the ever-varying scene on the broad waters of the Clyde. There is a large steamer slowly making her way seawards. May, who from long familiarity knows all the different colours and distinguishing marks of each company's vessels, knows that she is bound for America.

“How I wish I were going out in her,” says May to herself. “If I were quite poor, with no money, and were the wife of the steward or the cook, how pleasant it would be to go out and see what it looks like on the other side of the world——”

“May! May!” cried a full-toned voice behind her, interrupting the course of her somewhat unpractical reveries. The drawing-room door burst open, and a lady, stout and florid, with an alarming array of gold chains and locketts hung about her portly violet silk bust, and a disturbing flutter of violet and yellow cap-ribbons flying out behind her, entered. “May, there's

the five o'clock train come in, and your new dress has never come from town"—*town* meaning Glasgow. "It's too bad of that Miss Williams! You really must get another dressmaker. Paying all the money that we do, and not getting better attended to—it's shameful!"

"It doesn't matter, mamma. To-morrow, or to-morrow week, will do just as well; I am in no hurry for that dress."

"No hurry? Why not, when I most particularly wanted you to wear it to-night?"

"*To-night*, mother! Why should I wear a white silk dress trimmed with Venetian point lace to-night?" cried May, lifting her eyebrows with a pretty feint of utter amazement.

"Why, my love, have you forgotten that the Honourable Mr. Dorrington is coming to dinner?"

May turned away to the window with an angry little stamp of her small foot.

"For goodness' sake, mother, don't call the man that!" she said, irritably.

"Why, what have I said wrong?" said poor Mrs. Crocker, in bewilderment.

"I have told you so often, mother dear, not to call people 'the honourable;' it sounds so—so underbred!"

"Well, I am sure I thought it was all right. It's his name, and I don't quite think you should talk of a young gentleman like that, who will be a lord some



day, as 'the man.' That doesn't sound nice or respectful, I am sure, May."

May was silent. It was often hard to her to reconcile the real affection she felt for her parents and her respect for their genuine goodness, with the perpetual discord which the vulgarity and ignorance of their words and feelings created within her.

Under these circumstances May generally took refuge in silence. She looked back again at the moving panorama of shipping on the Clyde, but she thought no longer about going to America as the wife of the steward—other perplexities nearer home were filling her mind. She felt that such a remark as she had just listened to would have been, from any one else, infinitely amusing; but upon the lips of one's mother, such words are apt to become painful out of all proportion to their importance.

"Well, what *are* you going to wear, my dear?" said her mother, presently, seeing that May made no observation. "Your father will be vexed if you don't put on one of your prettiest gowns."

Then May turned suddenly round and faced her mother with flushing cheeks.

"What is the meaning of it, mamma?" she said, sharply. "But you need not tell me—I know it fast enough. This Mr.—Mr. Dorrington is brought here to inspect *me*—that is to say, he has been told that I am an heiress, and he would like my money, if I can make up my mind to like *him*. Mamma, I am sick of

them all ! How many men have been brought here with the same purpose, I should like to know ! ”

“ My dear, don’t get so excited. Young ladies are generally pleased to have a great many proposals. When I was a girl, your aunts and I thought it a fine thing ; we used to keep a written list, and downright proud was I because I had the most ! You should be flattered by it, May, not angry.”

“ *Flattered ?* Much flattery there is about it,” answered the girl, tossing back her head scornfully, “ when not one of them has ever cared one farthing about *me* ; it is the money they think of. They stay here three days, and then they come to me and tell me they adore me, and can’t live without me ! Faugh ! it’s disgusting. If only they didn’t tell lies about it, and said honestly that they wanted the money, I should, perhaps, like them better. But they are all a miserable set of fortune-hunters ! ”

“ My dear May, don’t talk like that. I am sure your father has never entertained any proposals for you from any man he did not feel he could not heartily wish to see his son-in-law ! ”

“ But, mamma, consider how many dozens of men there must have been whom papa would like for sons-in-law ! ”

And so there were ; they comprised the whole of the British aristocracy, root and branch. Mr. Crocker opened his heart freely to them all—every one.

Mrs. Crocker looked distressed.

"My dear, do you *never* mean to marry, then?" she asked, piteously.

May laughed.

"Yes, mother; the first man who loves me honestly—for *myself*, mind, and not for my money—shall be my husband. But I must be very sure of it first, and I warn you that if it should happen to be the railway porter or Donald the keeper, or anybody, that I shall marry him all the same."

"Oh! May, how *can* you talk in that dreadfully wicked way?" cried Mrs. Crocker, almost in tears. "To think, after all the money spent on your education, and all the pains taken with you to make a real lady of you, I should hear my only child talking about marrying the porter or the keeper! Oh! how *can* you say such things?"

May stooped over the back of her mother's chair and kissed her laughingly.

"Never mind, mammy; don't make yourself unhappy about it. I can take very good care of myself. But you may tell papa one thing for certain, and that is that I distinctly don't mean to marry Mr. Dorrington. *His* game is too patent, and moreover I have taken a great dislike to him beforehand."

"Oh! May, your father says he is such a nice-mannered, pleasant young gentleman. He met him, you know, at Sir John Harrison's the day before yesterday, and as they were coming over to-day, it

was only natural to ask him too. I think, perhaps, you make too much of his coming."

"Oh! I know papa better; and you can't deny that it is all a settled thing that he is to come as my suitor. *Can* you deny it, mammy?"

"Well, perhaps I ought not to have mentioned it—your father would scold me."

"Exactly. Just as I thought!" laughed May. "You didn't tell me, I guessed it, mamma. Well, you may tell papa if you like that it is waste of time, for I am not going to marry him."

Mrs. Crocker sighed.

"I must, at all events, request you to put on your black and silver dress," she said, in a melancholy voice.

"Certainly, mamma. The black and silver, did you say? Do you think it becoming? Well, I think it makes me look like a dyspeptic crow, but that is a matter of taste. You see it does not much matter *what* I put on, because it will make no earthly difference to the ardour of my admirer. If I were to get myself up in Satanic apparel, and wear scarlet horns, and brandish a three-pronged tail——"

"*May*, don't talk so indecorously!"

"Well, it is true, mamma. He would not find his affection in the least cooled by my remarkable appearance. He would tell me I was lovely—they all do! Now the one thing I am *not* is that. There are many things in which I have a faith and a vanity in myself

I think myself rather clever, and I think I am an honest, downright sort of girl—worth a man's while to love, did he only know it; but I never in my wildest dreams imagined myself lovely, and when they invariably begin by telling me so, it sets me against them."

"I am sure, May, many people have told me that you are very pretty," said her mother.

"Have they? Then that is because they were flattering you falsely, mamma, and you should not be so silly as to believe them."

"Perhaps Mr. Dorrington will not tell you so, May. How can you tell what he will do—or even whether he will like you at all?"

"Oh! he will like me—or say he does—fast enough!" cried May. She was standing in the middle of the room, in front of her mother's chair, twisting up a thick skein of her mother's wool into a knot. She looked rather flushed, and was a little bit excited with her subject, which, indeed, was one which she felt bitterly, although she spoke of it sarcastically. "You will see, mamma, what will happen. To-night he will hang over the piano, and will tell me I sing divinely: to-morrow he will stick to my side all day till I am sick of him; and Thursday morning he will ask for five minutes' private conversation in the morning-room; there he will fall upon his knees and protest to me that he will die of brain fever or go mad if I won't marry him; that I am the

most lovely and charming woman he knows, and that he worships the ground under my feet—that is what he will do, mamma !” And she made a step nearer to her mother and laid her hands upon her shoulders, whilst unconsciously her voice was a little raised to emphasize her words, “Mamma, *I hate Mr. Dorrington !*”

The door behind her was suddenly and noiselessly swung open by a powdered footman, and, before the words were out of her mouth, Harold Dorrington stood beside her.

## CHAPTER IV

## HAROLD'S FIRST ATTEMPT.

HAROLD DORRINGTON, thus suddenly ushered into the room where the sound of his own name, so uncomplimentarily uttered, was the first thing that met his ears, stood still in front of the two ladies in some embarrassment.

Mrs. Crocker jumped up hurriedly and ungracefully, scattering all her wools upon the floor in every direction, and made him a sweeping curtsy.

Whereat Harold recovered his presence of mind, and held out his hand with a pleasant smile.

"Your husband has sent me to introduce myself, Mrs. Crocker, and to tell you that he has gone with Lady Harrison and Sir John into the new pine-house. Lady Harrison thought she would like to see it before she came into the house, as we walked from the station, and she is a little tired. I was to ask you whether you and Miss Crocker," with a bow to that young lady, "will come out and join them there?"

All this time May Crocker was looking at him with a face brimful of intense amusement at the extreme comedy of the situation. When Harold, at

the conclusion of his little speech to her mother, looked at her and bowed, with something, she thought, of downright temper in his face, May could stand it no longer—she laughed outright.

“I was talking about you, Mr. Dorrington,” she said.

“Yes—so I *heard*!” answered Harold, pointedly; and he looked positively savage.

Poor Mrs. Crocker became purple with shame and vexation.

“Oh, Mr. Dorrington! I am sure I hope you did not attend to any of the silly nonsense May was talking as you came in. She talks in such a wild way, and never means any of the rubbish she says. I am sure I hope you will forget it.”

“Pardon me, Mrs. Crocker,” answered Harold, gravely; “I never forget anything a lady says, if I can help it. I would not be so ungallant. Had we not better go and join your husband?”

Mrs. Crocker rose and led the way. Harold followed her out of the room. May, having shortly declined to accompany them, was left by herself, feeling, let it be honestly confessed, decidedly piqued.

The men who had flattered and fawned upon her disgusted her, it is true; but a man who looked savagely at her, declining altogether the overtures of peace she had held out by means of that propitiatory laugh, by which she had sought to make up for the *contretemps* of her unlucky words, was a



new experience to her. Somehow May did not like it—she was unaccustomed to such treatment.

Left by herself, she went up to her own room, rang the bell for her maid, and then and there tormented the righteous soul of that dignified personage, for the space of half an hour, concerning the raiment which she intended to wear that evening. She was not apparently disposed to appear in the similitude of what she had called “the dyspeptic crow” to-night. Her maid had never known her so capricious and so hard to please. She had all her dresses laid out on the bed by turns, changed her mind half a dozen times, declared them all to be frightfully ugly, and was altogether in what her attendant afterwards defined as a “very contradictory humour.”

When she was finally dressed for dinner, in a pale dove-coloured silk, relieved by knots of dark red velvet, she surveyed her image in the glass with intense dissatisfaction.

“You are hideous, May!” she said, half aloud, making a grimace at herself, the maid having by this time left her. “Nothing can make you look even decently good-looking. There is nothing attractive about you but your horrid money! Oh! how I wish I was very poor and had to earn my living! I should find out then if there is any man in the whole world who would love me for myself. As it is,” and May turned away from her dressing-table,

with a pretty little toss of her head that was full of decision and character,—“as it is, it is quite certain that I shall die an old maid!”

Mrs. Crocker's dinner-table—thanks to the profusion of her hot-house flowers, which were lovely, and to the taste of her butler in arranging them, which was excellent—was a pretty and pleasant one to sit down to. Nor was there the slightest fault to be found with either the viands or the wine.

Sir John Harrison, who was something of a *gourmet*, always sat down to dinner at Fearn with a warm glow of pleasant expectation. He knew that he was in for a good thing, and he never failed to enjoy the culinary excellence set before him. He was a genial-mannered and good-hearted man, quite ready to be friends with the Crockers or with any one else who came in his way, and he was not quite free from a certain respectful admiration of the money which could command such a cook and such a cellar. In other matters he was somewhat bored by his host's political platitudes, and, being himself pre-eminently a keen sportsman, and nothing much beyond, took a far livelier interest in the prospects of the grouse than in, to his mind, the infinitely less exciting topics of Russian aggression, or of British interests in the East. Mr. Crocker, on the contrary, having begun life as one who had nothing to lose, and having been consequently in his earliest days the reddest of Red Republicans, with a fixed notion in his mind that he

had a divine and incontestable right to share in the goods and privileges of his betters, had, on becoming a wealthy man himself, by a very natural sequence completely altered his once broad views of *meum* and *tuum*. A millionaire, whose money is all comfortably and securely invested in the funds, and whose chief desire in life is to call a peer his son-in-law, has no longer any temptation to profess ultra-Liberal views.

Mr. Crocker became the staunchest of true-blue Conservatives. As he sits at the head of his own table, smiling radiantly above the wide expanse of his white waistcoat, his bald head, his round, rosy face and little snub nose, and his reddish-grey whiskers, that stick out on either side of his head, render him not unlike a well-fed little cherub. He talks pleasantly and confidentially to Sir John and to Harold about the necessity for the upper classes to hold well together. "We must stand up for our *own class*, sir, in these turbulent times," says Mr. Crocker, looking at his guests complacently, and rubbing his fat hands together.

Lady Harrison has this much in common with her hostess, she is portly, and she pants going upstairs; but in other respects she differs from her widely. There is no vulgarity in Lady Harrison's corpulence—she is a lady in every respect. Nevertheless she, too, appreciates good dinners and good wine, and she is not at all above availing herself frequently of

the hospitality of Fearn Castle; and though to her own chosen friends Lady Harrison is wont to complain of "that dreadful woman's vulgarity," she is nevertheless very gracious and even gushing in her manner to her hostess, whom she calls "my dear;" often laying her white, jewelled hands familiarly upon Mrs. Crocker's fat, red fists in affectionate emphasis of her remarks.

As to Harold and May, they do not address any conversation to each other. Harold, in truth, hardly looked at her; and, although he had somewhat recovered from the shock to his *amour propre* which the overhearing of her unlucky speech on his first arrival had given him, he was in no hurry to begin the compulsory love-making, which, with a very gushing and remarkably ill-spelt letter from Rosie in his breast-pocket, seemed more distasteful and repulsive to him than ever.

"She is not in the least pretty," he had said to himself, glancing at her once across the table, for she sat opposite to him, as he finished his turtle soup; "not in the least pretty, and, consequently, could never have the slightest attraction for me." For Harold believed that beauty in a woman was as absolutely indispensable as truth and courage in a man. A woman without beauty was, to him, hardly worthy of the name.

By-and-by, as dinner progressed, and as May entered into a bright and lively conversation with

Sir John Harrison, throwing herself eagerly and with a pretty excitement of manner into the subject under discussion, Harold caught himself looking at her steadily.

"No, she is not pretty," he said once more to himself; "but there is something about her—what is it? I think she is rather nice when she is talking."

After dinner he felt a vague desire to rouse her into animation himself. With that object he went and sat himself down upon the sofa by her side.

Now it is going to begin, thought May, and stiffened herself mentally into buckram.

"How do you amuse yourself all day, Miss Crocker?" began Harold, somewhat feebly.

"I walk, or I ride, or I drive, generally," answered May, without raising her eyes from the socks she was knitting for her father.

"Do you ever go on the water?" pursued Harold.

"Oh! yes, often. We have a boat-house at the end of the garden. Sometimes we have a boat and go out fishing, and sometimes I go out in my own canoe; and then papa has a yacht."

"Oh! has he? How far do you generally get in the yacht?"

"One, two, three, four," said May, counting her stitches. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Dorrington; I am just turning the heel—it takes all my attention. What was it you asked me? Oh! yes, I am a very good sailor, thanks."

Upon which Mr. Dorrington rose somewhat abruptly from the sofa, went over to the other side of the room, and sat down by Lady Harrison.

It was evident that this girl was bent on making herself disagreeable to him, thought Harold, who was angry that he had not been able to elicit so much as one look from her downcast eyes. Whatever she might be to other people, it was plain that she did not intend to be pleasant to him.

As he did not want to make love to her, this fact—being, of course, a simplification of matters—ought to have been a source of gratification to him; instead of which, oddly enough, it provoked and annoyed him beyond measure.

When presently he saw her look up brightly at Sir John Harrison, and make way graciously for him on the sofa in the place he had just vacated, Harold cursed himself for a fool not to have persevered a little longer in his attempt to make her talk to himself.

By-and-by May rose and went to the piano. She had a sweet though not very powerful voice, and she sang charmingly; nothing very elaborate—only some old Scotch and Irish songs—but they were so perfectly pronounced and so expressively sung—the singer evidently threw herself and her own feelings so completely into the personality of the words she uttered, that each song, grave or gay, produced a perfect effect upon the minds of her audience. Her singing, like

everything else this clever little woman undertook, left absolutely nothing to be desired.

Harold, who was intensely musical, said not a word ; but he listened intently, and was profoundly impressed. And May, who was, perhaps, a little proud of her singing, was annoyed that Mr. Dorrington had not joined in the plaudits which the rest of the party gave her when she rose from the piano.

“What a detestably bad temper that man has got !” said May to herself as she stood in her bedroom that night, slowly divesting her arms of the gold bracelets which encircled them ; “and how glad I am that I snubbed him ! I don’t suppose, though, that any snubbing will deter him from making the inevitable proposal, and from going through the stereotyped form of words in which they all declare their undying devotion to me ! He will have hard work to stifle that temper of his ! My goodness ! *what* a temper he has ! And what an odd thing it is that, though I think him detestably rude and bearish, somehow I think I like him better than most of them. He is, at all events, a great improvement upon that idiotic Lord Alforth.” Lord Alforth being a suitor who had not met with any favour or mercy at Miss Crocker’s fair hands some months previously.

Just then her mother entered.

“My love, what do you think of him ?” she asked, somewhat nervously. “Don’t you think he is very handsome ?”

“Sir John Harrison, mamma? He is a dear old man, certainly; but I never thought him handsome.”

“How can you be so foolish, May!” cried her mother. “Of course you know I mean Mr. Dorrington. I want to know how you like him?”

“I don’t like him at all, and I never shall!” answered the girl, laughing. “Good-night, mamma; I am very sleepy. If I dream of him I will tell you.”



## CHAPTER V

## MUTUAL CONFESSIONS.

It was clear to May, when she entered the breakfast-room on the following morning, where the rest of the party were already assembled, that her father and mother had, in the still hours of the night, been taking counsel with each other as to the best means of "throwing the young people together."

May found that the plans for the day's amusement were already fixed and settled, with no reference whatever to her own tastes or fancies in the matter.

It was a fine sunny morning, and Mr. Crocker had decreed that the barouche should be at the door at eleven o'clock, to take the four elders to a certain wooded promontory about seven miles off, from which there was a lovely view of Arran and of the Kyles of Bute. They were to take a luncheon-basket with them, and the two young people were to row themselves to the same place and join them by water. It was the show drive from Fearn Castle, and visitors were generally taken there, so there was nothing un-

usual in the arrangements, but May nevertheless made an unsuccessful and somewhat feeble attempt to alter the order of their going.

"Why should we not all go together in the waggonette? It is too hot for the water, papa," she said, not very graciously, as she sat down to the table and helped herself to toast and butter; "it is quite eight miles, and I am sure I can't row all that way—it would kill me."

"Mr. Dorrington will row you," said her father.

"Perhaps Mr. Dorrington can't row," said May; whereat Harold laughed, and Sir John Harrison became indignant.

"Not row!" he exclaimed. "Why, he was stroke of his college boat at Oxford, and his father was in the winning boat on the Thames when he and I were at college together! Fancy old Dorrington's boy not being able to row! Ha! ha! that's a good joke, Miss May.

May got a little red.

"Well," she said, turning to the young man, "don't you think that you would prefer driving, Mr. Dorrington?"

"Not at all, Miss Crocker. I have already voted for the boat. I think it will be far pleasanter, and we can take our time, your father says, so as not to be unduly tired with our exertions."

After which May had no other alternative but to submit with the best grace she could. By ten minutes past eleven, therefore, the elders had driven off in the

barouche, and May, in a pretty little white serge boating dress, attended by her not very willing companion, sauntered slowly across the smooth lawns and through the shady shrubbery path which led down to the boat-house.

"Don't you think," said the young lady, not without a distinct sense of the intense comedy of her proposition—"don't you think if we were to take two canoes it would be more amusing?"

"It would be very unsociable," said Harold, laughing. "No; decidedly, let us have the boat."

"We shall quarrel all the way," demurred May.

"No. It takes two to make a quarrel, and I am determined to be friends with you. I am in the best of tempers this morning."

"That was more than you were last night," said May, almost involuntarily, and then blushed; she could not have told why.

Harold helped her into the boat, and she took the sculls, declaring that she intended to row down with the tide, and that he should do all the hard work back. When they were fairly started, Harold leant forward and said, very seriously:

"Miss Crocker, why are you so determined to hate me?"

May rested on her oars, and looked away across the wide stream towards the heather-covered hills that bounded the distant horizon. The boat glided along by herself upon the stream. The water and all the

mountains were hazy with the golden summer light, and flocks of white sea-gulls swooped round and round between them and the further shore. May looked at it all without seeing it. Her eyes were suddenly blinded, and all the fair scene blotted out by hot tears of shame and humiliation.

"Because—because," she cried, with a sudden passionate outburst, that seemed to break down all the barriers of reserve and antagonism which had stood between them—"because—oh! don't you see that it is because they want me so much to like you? It is in self-defence that I want to hate you."

"Poor little girl!" said Harold, softly, and all at once May appeared to him in a new light. All the glamour and the fascination about her touched him suddenly like a revelation, and it never afterwards occurred to him to think that she was not so pretty as Rosie Wood.

"Look here, Miss Crocker," he said, suddenly, "why should not you and I understand each other? I think we might be very good friends if we did. We might like each other thoroughly, instead of snarling and fighting. Of course, you know why—that is to say, the reason—with what ambitious hopes, in short—my father wished me to come here. Your father was good enough—that is——"

May burst out laughing.

"Don't be shy," she said. "Of course, I know that our fathers think my money and your birth and future

title would be a very fair exchange ! You need not try and put it into pretty, polite language."

" Yes, that is about it." And Harold began to think that May Crocker was the very nicest girl he had ever met in his life—always excepting, of course, his own Rosie. " Well," he continued, feeling thankful to her for having helped him out of the quagmire of his embarrassment on to firm ground—" well, I suppose I am an impostor to come here at all, but I could not get out of it. My father is very angry with me about some wretched bills I can't pay, and he refused to pay them for me, unless I came up here and did my best to——"

" Yes, to marry me. I understand."

" You will perhaps guess how repulsive the whole business is to me, and how miserable I am, Miss Crocker, when I tell you that I am entirely devoted to a girl who lives in our own parish, whom I love with all my heart, and who fully returns my affection."

" Oh, Mr. Dorrington, I am so glad !" said May. " Please tell me all about her."

She leant forward, eagerly fixing her eyes upon him with intensest interest ; and the boat glided slowly down the current by herself.

Here, thought May, was a story of real love at last ! Poor May, who had seen so much of the counterfeit, and nothing at all but in her own foolish dreams of the real thing ; and now she was to be made the confidante of this romance of real life.

"Tell me all about it, Mr. Dorrington. Of course, your father does not know of it."

"No; that is just it—of course he does not, and never must know."

"And she is poor?"

"Oh, yes—quite poor."

"I am so glad! Of course, you will stick to her? I respect and honour you so much, Mr. Dorrington. Not all the money in the world would tempt you to give up the girl you love? That is what I like to hear about."

May was all flushed and eager. Her eyes sparkled; her lips were parted in breathless interest.

"How pretty she looks!" thought Harold to himself; and indeed May was downright pretty at that moment.

"Of course, you see what a false position I am in here."

"What does that matter!" cried May, with a little impatient movement of her hand; "we will settle all that presently. Tell me more about her. Is she pretty? Describe her to me."

"She is more than pretty—she is *beautiful*," said Harold—"the most beautiful woman I have ever seen." And he straightway treated his most sympathetic listener to a lengthy and minute description of Rosie Wood's face—to which, however, I need not condemn my readers. This rhapsody lasted quite ten minutes, May drinking in every word of it.

"Oh!" with a sigh, "how much I should like to see her! And she is clever, too, of course, and very accomplished? She is musical, I have no doubt, and I suppose she is very well read, and knows everything?"

"Well, no; not exactly. She is no fool, of course, but the fact is, she is not quite—not quite in the way of having been educated;" and Harold felt a sudden embarrassment as to how he was to further describe the status of his village beauty.

"She has been too poor, perhaps?" suggested May. "Her parents could not afford to give her many lessons?"

Harold was fidgeting with an end of rope, tying it industriously up into a great many knots.

"Well, the fact is, she is not quite in the same rank of life that I am."

"No more am I, Mr. Dorrington," said May, lightly.

"Oh, I did not mean *that*. You are a lady: this girl lives in a cottage."

"She is *not a lady!*" The intense dismay and disappointment in her voice—indeed, it almost amounted to *disgust*—nettled Harold.

"She is one of Nature's ladies!" he said, rather hotly.

But May returned to her sculls, and rowed on in silence. She asked no more questions about his lady-love; to tell the truth, she felt a little bit afraid of

pursuing the subject any further. It occurred to her that the loves of the gentleman and the village girl had possibly better not be inquired into too closely. And she was disappointed—oh ! so bitterly disappointed—in Harold ! She was beginning to like him so much ; and now—oh ! it was quite certain she could never make a friend of him, or care about that girl. Of course she had entrapped him, and made a fool of him ! Horrid, odious girl ! May felt that she hated her with a bitter, unreasonable hatred, though why on earth she should do so, she would have been puzzled to say.

Harold, too, felt annoyed and angry. He could see that he had sunk in his companion's good opinion, and that she had no longer any sympathy with his love affairs. It made him sulky, and he wished heartily he had never told her that Rosie was not a lady.

But presently May smothered down her resentment ; it was foolish, she thought, and rather unkind, and spoke again :

“ Well, Mr. Dorrington, I am very glad you have told me all this. I think now we shall understand each other. I can quite see how unpleasant it must have been to you to come here with all this on your mind. But now I must tell you something, too. It is quite fair that I should give you a little of my confidence in return for yours.”



"What? Do you love some one else, too?" asked Harold, quite sharply.

"No," laughing a little; "not that. But I must tell you, Mr. Dorrington, that I am a most determined young woman. I have had a great many offers—so many, indeed, that I can hardly recollect them all! That might sound a conceited speech from some girls, but to me it is a matter of heartfelt shame and annoyance. I am not at all proud of these offers, Mr. Dorrington, because they have all been made not to myself, but to my money! There is nothing flattering in that, you know. I am only the necessary incumbrance tacked on. Well, now, what I want to tell you is this: that I have quite made up my mind never to marry any man who does not love me—*me* myself—quite independent of this wretched money. How I am ever to find this man I don't know, but when I do find him I shall marry him."

"But you might not care for him," suggested Harold.

"Oh! yes, I shall!" answered May, with a confident little nod. "So now, you see," she continued, after a pause, "that as you love some one else, I could never have married *you*!" She laughed a little, and a soft blush stole up suddenly into her face.

Harold caught himself wishing he had not told her quite so much about his attachment to Rosie. Of course he would be quite true to Rosie—of that there could be no possible doubt; but up here, miles away

from her, it would have been rather pleasant to have fostered a dreamy, sentimental kind of flirtation with this girl with the sensitive face and the musical laugh. He felt sorry he had cut himself off from this by his too open confidences.

"I suppose, then," he said, rather gloomily, "that I must go back and face my father's wrath and all my unpaid debts?"

"I have been thinking of that. No, I don't see why we should not get the debts paid. The bargain was, you say, that you were to propose to me?"

"Yes."

"Well," cried May, suddenly, clapping her hands together excitedly, "you *shall* propose to me!"

"How do you mean?" said Harold, puzzled.

"You shall propose, and I, of course, shall refuse you. You will go home and tell your father that you have done your best, but that the heiress would not have you. You may pretend to be dreadfully unhappy, but your father will forgive you and pay your bills, and you will be able to marry the girl you love. Do you see? it will be as good as a play! We must take them all in; papa, and mamma, and the Harisons, too. We will keep it well up—no one shall guess the truth."

"By Jove! what a clever girl you are! and how good of you to think of such a thing. Are you sure, though, that it won't be a great bore to you?"

Harold felt quite overcome by the magnitude and ingenuity of the scheme.

"A bore? Not the love-making, for of course we will dispense with that; but we must keep up appearances. How soon do you think you can do it? In three days?"

"What! propose? Good heavens, no! My father would never believe in it under a week!" laughed Harold.

"Oh, three days is the usual time they take about it!" said May, "they" meaning the whole body of former lovers; "but a week will certainly *sound* better. Very well, then, you must stay with us for a week; then you shall propose, be rejected with contumely, and depart the following morning *heart-broken*."

They both laughed.

"Here we are!" cried May; "and there is papa waving his hat to us from the point. How glad I shall be to get some iced champagne! Won't you?"

They landed, laughing and joking like a couple of children in the best possible spirits. Suddenly, May turned to him and said, with emphasis:

"I make but one condition with you. Will you agree to it?"

"As many as you like. Oh! best and most charming of women! you have but to name it!"

"From this minute till the proper time for the

event to come off you are to make no allusion whatever to our talk to-day—not one single word. We are simply going to be good friends. Do you understand?”

“I am not to make love to you?” laughed Harold; but there was a little pique in his voice.

“Certainly not!” with some asperity, adding more gently, “we are going to be the very best of friends, you and I, are we not? Is it a bargain?”

“Decidedly.”

“Give me your hand on it, then.”

She held out her little dimpled, rosy-fingered hand to him.

Harold took it, looked at it, then up at her face, then back again at the hand. They had landed now, and the sheltering trees that came down to the water's edge completely concealed them from the rest of the party whose voices they could hear above them. What was there in the contact of that soft hand that sent the blood tingling and throbbing with a strange rapture to his heart? Harold never knew.

Only what he did was this. He stooped suddenly and swiftly, and pressed the little open palm to his lips.

If May Crocker had been a very decorous and right-minded young woman, I suppose she would have been very angry. She would have been indignant at such a liberty, would have reproved the young man for impertinence, and have turned her

back upon him in a rage. I suppose young ladies do that when gentlemen presume to give caresses which they don't like.

May did nothing of the kind. She flushed a very deep rosy red, and snatched her hand away a little hastily, and they began to walk up the steep bank together without her having uttered one word of indignation or of outraged dignity upon the event which had just occurred. I am therefore forced to come to the sad conclusion that this young woman, being not at all conventional, only a very natural and simple-hearted sample of her sex, actually rather liked it than otherwise.

## CHAPTER VI.

## ALICE DORRINGTON MAKES A DISCOVERY

THE three Miss Dorringtons were no longer very young; Augusta and Louisa were both older than Harold, and were respectively aged thirty and twenty-eight — Alice, the youngest, was four-and-twenty. They were not so good-looking as their brother by any means, still they were all three tall fair women, with small thorough-bred heads and straight features; their eyes were grey and well-shaped, and their noses were thin and straight, and, like all true Dorrington noses from generation to generation, were rather too long and somewhat out of proportion to the rest of their faces. Still, they had always been accounted as graceful-looking girls. When they were all under five-and-twenty, they used to be called the “three Graces;” now they were older, Alice used often to say their name would be changed—they would be called, she affirmed, “the three Fates,” or “the Grey Sisters.”

Why they had none of them married was a matter of some wonder to the neighbourhood. It is true that their father was a poor man, and that they were

portionless ; but that was not sufficient to account for the persistency with which the triple spinsterhood was maintained.

The girls themselves and their mother knew very well why it was. Lord Dorrington would not have objected to a very brilliant match for any of his daughters. Failing that, he had preferred to keep his girls at home. He liked their society ; it was pleasant to him to hear their voices about the house and in the garden ; he liked to have his cup of tea brought him by Alice in the evening, whilst Louisa played Irish melodies in the twilight to him, or Augusta challenged him to a game of chess or backgammon.

He would have spared them willingly, he often said to himself, to adorn a position of wealth or influence, but no wretched genteel pauperism should take any of his daughters away from the home they made so pleasant to himself, and drag them down from the proper standing to which their birth and breeding entitled them. So it was that when lovers presented themselves for any of them, Lord Dorrington set his heel down firmly and decisively, and hardened his heart against the tears and the pleadings of his daughters. The lovers had not been such as Lord Dorrington approved of, and he would have none of them.

The daughters had each of them had their little romance in life, sad and short. To Augusta and

Louisa it had come so long ago that they had long recovered the sting of it, and they used to talk it all over in the evenings together, as they chattered in each other's rooms, with little jokes interspersed with sighs over their mutual reminiscences.

"Don't you remember how he sent me that lovely bouquet of camellias for the county ball?" one would say.

"Yes; and do you remember how angry he was because mamma would not let you dance twice running with him?" and so on. But the talks always ended dutifully with a sigh, half-regretful, but entirely resigned:

"Ah! well, I suppose dear papa was right."

For it never would have occurred to either of these extremely right-minded young women to dream of disobeying or even of disputing the will of the family autocrat. A runaway match was a thing to be done, no doubt, by some women, but not by Dorringtons; such a thing would be an impossibility to them, even in the wildest imaginations of a love-sick fancy.

All this was for Augusta and Louisa, who had, as I said, left the romance of their youth far behind them. But with Alice things were very different. Alice's trouble had been quite recent, so recent that it was never alluded to in the sisterly conclave. Augusta and Louisa would look at her pityingly, and call her "poor Ally," and wonder from day to day whether she did not look a little more like "her old



self," and whether the process of "getting over it," which each of them had gone through satisfactorily in her turn, was working itself out properly in their younger sister. For it was only two short years ago since a certain regiment of foot-soldiers had been quartered at the neighbouring garrison town. A regiment unspoken of and unnoted in the service, and whose officers were all poor and needy, and forced for the most part to live—or to endeavour to live—within the narrow limits of their pay.

And amongst them was one who had learnt to love Alice Dorrington very dearly. He had never told her so, but she had thought she had seen it in his eyes. They had met often throughout the whole of one happy summer, at dances, and at garden-parties, and often and often he had ridden out to Dorrington Hall and put up his little brown mare in the stables, and stopped on to lunch and to dinner. Lord and Lady Dorrington had welcomed him hospitably, and Alice had looked at him sweetly and shyly with all her young love in her eyes.

One night the girl had crept out unobserved into the summer darkness, to wish her lover—hers in all but name—farewell, as he rode away through the sweet-scented lime avenue. She had fancied he looked sad and down-hearted; she had thought that perhaps he had remembered that he was poor, and that he was afraid to speak. And, thinking herself secure of his love, she had waxed bold. She crept

softly away out of the lighted room, and ran down the avenue to wait for him at the gate, half-way in the park.

When he came trotting along on the little brown mare, Alice stood suddenly before him in her white evening dress, holding out a trembling hand to him.

"I—I had not wished you good night," she said softly, thankful to the darkness for hiding her blushes.

And then the young man had bent low from his saddle, and had whispered into her ear words that had made her heart beat wildly then—that had made her ears tingle with shame and mortification ever since.

"My darling!" he had said, "how good of you! I shall never forget this—never. Good night, my sweet love; I must not keep you now!" and then he had kissed her just once lightly on the forehead, and had ridden away through the gathering darkness.

But Alice Dorrington had never seen her lover again.

A week went by and there was no word or sign of the young officer. He came no more trotting up the lime avenue, and he wrote no single line to poor Alice. A week's suspense, and then a second, and then a third. Then there came a day when, sitting down to dinner one night with his family, Lord Dorrington remarked cheerfully, as he carved the salmon into equal portions:

"Oh! by the way, I met Colonel Anderson to-day,

as I was riding through Wormington on my way back, and he mentioned that Captain Denham has exchanged into the 104th under orders for India, so I suppose that is why we haven't seen him lately."

"Exchanged!" cried Augusta and Louisa in a breath, for of course they knew how it was with Alice.

"Dear me, how odd of him not to call and wish us good-by, after having been here so often," said Lady Dorrington; "really some of these young men have very little manners."

"Has he—has the regiment gone, papa?" asked Louisa, anxiously.

"Gone, or going, my dear, I really forget which. Oh! yes, by the way, Colonel Anderson said they were to sail on the 20th, that's to-day, of course; then I suppose he is off now, and a fair wind down Channel. Don't you take any salmon, Alice?"

"Do you feel the room too hot, my love?" asked her mother.

But Alice answered never a word, only she dropped straight off her chair on to the floor in a dead faint; and her father and the butler had to carry her up to her own room between them as best they could.

All that was two years ago now; but no one ever spoke of it again, nor was Lionel Denham's name ever mentioned by any of the family.

To-day, as the three sisters sit out on the lawn, under the shadow of a spreading tulip-tree, each with

her fancy-work in her hands, Alice looks as calmly happy and contented as either of her sisters. No one who saw them for the first time would discover any difference between them. Only those who knew Alice long ago would find out that she is a shade paler, a trifle quieter, a little more gentle, and more subdued than she used to be.

The Miss Dorringtons are talking now of their brother. Failing any more personal interest, Harold's love affairs are of paramount importance in the family discussions. Of course they have all heard about Miss Crocker, and they know with what object their brother is now staying at the Crockerian mansion.

"How are we to get on with her, I wonder!" exclaimed Louisa; "a horrid, vulgar, low-bred woman!—that is what these *nouveaux riches* always are."

"Harold has never said one word about her in any of his letters," said Alice; "he has never told us she was vulgar—perhaps she is not."

"That is just what looks so bad," answered Louisa. "If there had been any good to be said about her he would have said it fast enough; but he does nothing but describe the magnificence of the furniture and the beauty of the scenery. It looks very ominous."

"Well, whatever she is, my dears," said Augusta, philosophically, "we shall have to make the best of her. If papa has decided that it is to be, there is no help for any of us; we shall have to submit. It is Harold's own fault for getting into so many scrapes."

"Poor Harold!" sighed Alice, softly.

Just then a footman came across the lawn to where they were sitting.

"It is a girl from the village, Miss," he said, addressing Alice, who was the one interested in village matters; "she wanted to know if she might speak to you about some needlework she thought you might have for her."

"Oh! it is that pretty Rose Wood!" cried Alice. "I want you so much to see her, Augusta. You will be sure to want her to sit to you for her portrait. Let us have her out here, by all means! Yes, Thomas, I will see her here now"

Presently, directed by the footman, Rosie Wood came timidly round the corner of the house from the back premises towards the little encampment of the ladies on the lawn. She came modestly and quietly, but she was making good use of her eyes, and looking about her sharply and keenly all the time, peeping into the windows as she passed, and glancing rapidly in at the open hall-door as she went by it.

"It will all be mine some day," said Rosie to herself, and then stood before the ladies, dropping her little curtsy to them demurely, as all the good girls in the village were accustomed to do.

"Well, Rose Wood," said Alice, kindly, looking up from her work at her. "So I hear your mother is ill. Is that why you have come to ask for work?"

"Yes, Miss, mother is very bad with the rheumatics,

and can't take in any washing this week ; so I thought I'd ask you for a bit of work."

"Why don't you do the washing for your mother?" asked Alice.

Rosie looked down at her hands, that were almost as white and smooth as a lady's, and coloured.

"Afraid of spoiling your pretty hands; is that it, Rose?" laughed Augusta.

"Father doesn't like me to do the washing," said Rosie, colouring still more deeply; for it was Harold who had told her he would not have her spoil her hands over the washing-tub.

"Very well then, I will give you something to do; but I have no dressmaking just now. What would you like best?"

"I can knit beautifully, Miss," said Rosie, eagerly, "if there was any socks wanted for the gentlemen?"

"Well, I don't know that there are. Lord Dorrington never wears knitted socks, and my brother is away just now, and I don't know when he will be back, so I can't say whether he wants any."

As this was precisely what Miss Rosie had called to discover, she was no sooner satisfied upon this point than she professed herself ready and willing to do any kind of work for the ladies, she did not mind what it was. Louisa having discovered something to be done for her, which she did not want in the very least, referred her to Lady Dorrington's lady's-maid on her

way back through the house, and Rosie made another curtsey and prepared to take her leave.

“Would you like a few flowers to take to your mother?” asked Alice, kindly, as the girl was moving off.

Rosie was, of course, gratefully delighted, and Alice got up and walked across the lawn to the flower-beds, and began picking some roses and geraniums for her; Rosie standing by, murmuring her gratitude and pleasure at every flower she gathered.

When she had picked them, Alice turned round and gave the flowers into her hands, but either Rosie was nervous, or Alice was strangely awkward, for somehow, as the transfer was taking place, the flowers all tumbled down on to the lawn between them.

Rosie laughed, and stooped down quickly to pick them up, whilst Alice sent a kind message to her mother.

“That is your way to the housekeeper’s room; you will find the lady’s-maid there;” said Alice—and Rosie, with all her flowers hurriedly gathered up in her dress, took her departure.

Alice stood looking admiringly after the pretty figure for a minute, until it disappeared round the corner of the house, and then turned away to join her sisters. Just as she did so, something glittering that lay on the grass before her caught her eyes. She stooped down and picked it up. It was a gold locket, hanging to a short piece of hair chain, the ends of

which had snapped asunder. It was thick and heavy, and set with diamonds surrounded by small pearls.

“It must be Rosie Wood’s,” said Alice, turning it over and over in her hands. “How on earth did she come by such a thing, I wonder!” and then, impelled by an irresistible curiosity, she opened it. Inside, was on one side a curl of yellow hair, on the other was engraven the words—“*From Harold to Rosie.*”



## CHAPTER VII.

## THE LOCKET

ALICE DORRINGTON stood motionless for some minutes upon the lawn, staring at the gold locket she had picked up, and turning it over and over wonderingly in her hands. It took her some minutes to realize plainly what it was that she held.

Although she had read the words engraved upon it, she could not at first understand that it was a present from her own brother—from Harold Dorrington, Lord Dorrington's son—to Rose Wood, the village girl, whose mother took in washing, and who had just come to ask her to give her some needlework. The two ideas seemed incompatible ; the two people whose names were thus written together before her eyes seemed far as the Poles asunder. What could this strange conjunction mean ?

To a girl like Alice, brought up with all the pride of her class, and all the refinement and purity of soul of her sex and race, ideas of this kind come but slowly and bewilderingly, and when fully realized produce an absolute shock upon the moral nature.

When it began at length to dawn upon her that this

locket was a love-gift from her brother to a village girl, Alice, standing alone by herself upon her father's lawn, with no eye to see her, and no voice to give utterance to her bewildered thoughts, crimsoned hotly and painfully from her brow to her chin. When she began to understand it, there was but one meaning which she knew how to attach to the trinket she held—a meaning that was shameful and degrading.

The voices of her sisters, calling to her from the further end of the garden, roused her from her painful abstraction. She slipped the locket hastily into her pocket and joined them.

All day long she was silent and full of thought. What was she to do with it? That was the question which was troubling her. What use was she to make of this strange and dreadful discovery which had been thrust upon her? Was she to take any active steps in the matter; to tell any one of her own family—her father, or her mother, or Harold himself—of what she had found out, or was she simply to send back the locket and say nothing about it, and let things take their own course? This latter alternative was what she would have liked best, but she could not reconcile it to her conscience to do so.

When she went up to her own room she took the locket out of her pocket, touching it as though its very contact were pollution to her white taper fingers, and wrapping it up in several thick folds of paper, locked it safely away in the depths of her

dressings-case. There she decided to let it rest till the morrow.

All night long she lay awake, tossing about restlessly in her bed, her affection for her brother struggling with her disgust and horror at this shameful intrigue; until at last affection, as it will in the heart of every true woman, won the day. Come what might, she could not, she felt, do Harold the injury of speaking of this business to any other member of the family. She must keep her discovery and her suspicions to herself, and somehow or other she must give Rosie Wood the locket herself.

She rose in the morning feeling feverish and unrested, but more decided about her best course of action than she had done over-night. As soon as breakfast was over she put on her hat and gloves, and, taking the obnoxious trinket in her hand, started off bravely in the direction of the village.

There was a narrow field-path leading down from the back of the village to the margin of the trout stream, which, after winding and rippling in graceful curves through Dorrington Park, came more soberly out into the public gaze, and flowed straightly and swiftly through the flat meadows outside the park railings, passing through the centre of the village at a stone's-throw from the public-house.

Along this pathway there was a stile, and against the stile on this particular morning, on the side nearest the river, leant Rosie Wood, with her broad

white sun-bonnet tipped a little forward over her nose, her fresh cotton dress well gathered up above her neatly-shod feet, and with an empty basket hanging upon her arm.

On the further side of the stile, with elbows leaning upon the uppermost rail thereof, and rough, unshaven chin in his hands, with fustian garments stained and soiled by many a day's hard toil and labour, was Rosie Wood's honest but rustic lover, David Haythorn.

"Oh! my gal," he was saying, with all his love in his eyes, "why won't you listen to me? Rosie, you're never going to throw away the love of an honest chap like me, who can give you a home and marry you right off, for the sake of a few flattering words from a fine young gentleman as don't think twice about you?"

"I don't know whatever you can mean!" said Rosie, with a little conscious toss of her pretty head.

"Oh! yes, you know fast enough, lass! It's the young master as has turned your head. He don't mean no harm by you; it's only just his fun. That's the way with the gentry, they just talk and talk with a pack o' fine words that mean nothing at all but play to them. I can't say them kind o' things to you, my lass, but I can make you my wife and love you dearly, Rosie, and that's more than any gentleman will ever do for you, for all your pretty face."

"I don't know how you dare talk to me like that, David!" cried Rosie passionately, while tears of angry

mortification rushed up into her eyes. "What is it to you what I do, and what other men may say of me; and why shouldn't Mr. Dorrington, or any other gentleman in the land, like me well enough to marry me? I'm not like the other village girls—father says so—I ought to look higher for a husband."

"If you think that, my lass, you stand in great danger," said the working man, seriously.

Rosie pouted her rosy lips.

"You've no cause to talk like that to me, David Haythorn," she said. "Some day you'll be sorry you said so, when you see me made a great lady of——"

"You'll never be made a lady of!" interrupted David, bringing his rough fist fiercely down upon the top of the stile. "No gentleman will ever make a *lady* of you, for all your beauty. What he'll make of you will be an outcast and a by-word among women."

"How dare you!—how dare you!" cried Rosie, stamping her foot furiously. "I hate you—you wicked, cruel man. I wish you were dead—I do with all my heart!" and she burst into a flood of passionate tears.

It was upon this scene that Alice Dorrington came suddenly, as she turned the corner of the field along the pathway from the Hall to the village. Rosie Wood, sobbing wildly, and David Haythorn looking at her troubled and half repentant, and altogether wretched at her angry and vindictive words.

At the sight of Miss Alice, the man touched his hat, and shuffled awkwardly away across the turnip-field on the further side, whilst Rosie hastily dried her eyes and stifled down her sobs, and felt ashamed and vexed at being caught in such an outburst of temper.

“What is the matter, Rosie?” asked Miss Dorrington, kindly. “Are you unhappy about anything?”

Rosie bent her head, till her sun-bonnet completely sheltered her flushed and ruffled face, played with the corner of her apron, and said nothing.

“What are you crying for?” continued Alice; and then lowering her voice, and looking cautiously round lest any one should overhear her, she added, “is it—is it because of anything you have lost?”

Rosie looked up suddenly at her, a little startled; but it was the young lady from the Hall who coloured guiltily and confusedly. The village maiden only looked a little bit frightened. She put up her hand instinctively to her throat, where she had been accustomed to wear her treasure concealed in the bosom of her dress, and from where, on coming home last night, she had missed it—much to her consternation and dismay.

“I—I don’t know, Miss Alice,” she answered, with a cunning assumption of rustic awkwardness and dullness which seemed to her the best mode of self-defence in the attack from this altogether unexpected quarter.

“Oh! yes, Rose; you must know perfectly well what you have lost;” said Alice, with a little asperity.

"Why do you pretend not to know? You dropped something in the garden yesterday when you were talking to me—and I have found it. Rose," she added, suddenly laying her hand kindly on the girl's, and looking earnestly and entreatingly into her face, "I want you to tell me the meaning of it all. I am dreadfully shocked and sorry to have found such a thing; but if you have done anything wrong, poor child, I will so gladly help you, and will never tell any one about it, if you will only make a clean breast of it to me, and be guided by me for the future. Don't be afraid to tell me everything, Rose—I will not be hard on you."

"I have nothing to tell. I have done nothing wrong," said Rosie, twisting herself away irritably from Alice's gentle touch; and there was a sudden, sullen lowering of her lovely brows, which the elder girl, not quite knowing what she had to deal with, did not notice.

"Nothing wrong? Oh! I am very, very glad and thankful for that, Rose. I can't tell you what a relief it is to me to hear you say that. But now you will do what I tell you, won't you? You know it is so easy for a pretty girl like you—for you *are* very pretty, Rosie—to get evil spoken of. If any one else were to know you wore such a locket as this, given you by a gentleman, they might think dreadful things about you—that would be very sad, would it not? In this world we must be careful to avoid even the

appearance of evil—you know that, Rose, as well as I can tell it you : so now I want you to give me leave to send this locket, which is a great deal too fine for you to dare to wear openly as an ornament—to send it straight back to Mr. Harold. I will tell him you think it very kind of him to have given it you, but that you think it wisest to send it him back.”

Thus far Alice, in her sweet-toned voice, had spoken her little speech of counsel and gentle reproof—the little speech she had thought so much about during the night, and over which she had pondered so anxiously, hoping so earnestly that she might be enabled to do some good—some real lasting good—by the interference which fate had forced upon her. Thus far she had spoken, and then something suddenly stopped short the current of her words—a something that froze her blood with amazement and dismay, and almost indeed with terror.

This something was Rosie Wood’s face.

Rosie Wood, transformed, as if by magic, from the modest deferential village girl which she had always known her, into a raging, angry woman.

Whether it was that Miss Dorrington’s gentle lecture, following so immediately upon David Haythorn’s more vigorous and less delicately worded warning, acted with too exasperating an effect upon her injured pride, or whether it was simply an angry and blind determination to assert her own position to Harold’s sister at all hazards and at any risk, it is perhaps



difficult exactly to define. But certain it is that Rosie Wood then and there lost her self-control, that she flung off that cloak of good manners and timid maidenhood which she had hitherto scrupulously maintained, and stood revealed to Alice Dorrington's astonished gaze in her real and true colours.

She made one step forward and thrust out her hand.

"You will give me back my locket now, at once," she said, defiantly. "How dare you talk of keeping it or sending it back to him! It is mine, and I *will* have it."

"Rosie!" gasped Alice, recoiling more from the blazing anger in the beautiful bold eyes fixed upon her, than from the threatening attitude and outstretched hand.

"Yes, I mean it!" continued Rosie, answering the bewilderment in her companion's face. "What is there wonderful in a man's giving a present to a girl? How would you like if somebody came and took away from you something that that handsome gentleman, who used to come here two summers ago courting you, gave to you?"

"Oh, Rosie!" cried Alice again, flushing painfully.

"Why am I to be called a bad girl and suspected of all sorts of wicked things because Mr. Harold has given me a present?" continued the girl, speaking rapidly and recklessly. "You have no right to take away my good name, Miss Alice, for such a cause."

"I have not taken away your good name. How

can you be so unjust to me! I have only tried to give you a little good advice; ask your father or your mother, or any of your friends in your own station of life, and they will tell you the same: they will say what I do, that a village girl who wears such things lays herself open to slander; but if you value your reputation less than you do this wretched trinket, here, take it, Rosie! but remember that you force me now to speak to my brother about it."

She held out the locket, and Rosie took it—almost snatched at it indeed, and turned it over and over greedily and eagerly as though to make sure that it had not been in any way spoilt or injured by Harold's sister.

Alice watched her curiously and earnestly, and a something of pity and compassion came into her soft, womanly heart at the sight of this lovely girl, who seemed to her to be rushing headlong upon certain misery and destruction.

In spite of her rude and angry words, Alice Dorrington once more spoke gently and tenderly to her:

"Rosie, I am sorry if you think I am hard on you and have suspected you unjustly. But why will you not make a friend of me and tell me what is in your heart? What makes you value that locket so much? Is it—oh! can it be that you really love my brother very much?"

She clasped her hands together and looked at her with earnest eyes all dewy with gentle sympathy, for

Alice had not forgotten the sad little romance of her own life, and at four-and-twenty a woman's heart is full of intense interest and soft sorrow for a love story. If this poor girl really did love Harold, how infinitely was she not to be pitied! and how gladly would she not help her to go away to another place where she could learn to forget and to get over so fatal a passion! For that anybody concerned—and Rosie least of all—should expect or imagine that marriage could be thought of for a minute between two such widely different people, had not yet entered into the head of Lord Dorrington's daughter. It was dreadfully wicked of Harold to have made love, however innocently, to this poor girl; but if he had unwittingly taught her to love him, was she not sincerely to be pitied? and who so well adapted to pity and to help her out of her trouble as Harold's own sister!

But when Alice, all trembling and pitiful, asked Rosie so hesitatingly whether indeed she loved Harold very much, Rosie Wood, for all answer, flung back her lovely head and laughed.

How innocent they all were! she said to herself; and though she laughed she was angry, too; it was irritating to be given credit for so much finer feeling than she possessed. David was always telling her she "loved" Mr. Dorrington, and now here was Mr. Dorrington's own sister telling her the same thing. How blind they must be not to see that Dorrington Hall, and to be made "my lady" of, was what she

wanted ! Was it likely that a girl with ambition like hers would be led astray or fall into sin and shame for such a paltry, profitless reason as affection !

Had they but known it, these two people need not have distressed themselves over the danger to Rosie's character. She wanted Dorrington Hall, and she did not even know what love meant, for both of which reasons her virtue was unassailable.

But when she saw how bewildered and even shocked Miss Dorrington looked at her because she laughed, Rosie Wood, who was a true woman down to her finger-tips, could not resist the temptation of making her triumph over the other woman complete ; she could not help flourishing her captured flags, as it were, in the face of her enemy.

" Oh ! Miss Alice ! " she said, laughing still, and defiantly twirling about her recovered treasure by the broken hair chain, " thank you very much. You mean it kindly, I am sure, and I am very sorry that I should have spoken up so hotly and lost my temper. I had no business to do that, but it does seem a great fuss to make over a locket ; for, after all, it is nothing very wonderful that a gentleman should give a little trinket to the girl he has promised to marry, is it ? "

And then Alice Dorrington staggered, white and trembling, against the stile between them, as if she had been struck by an actual blow, whilst Rosie Wood smiled at her opposite—mockingly and triumphantly.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## A LOVE LETTER

UP in Scotland, one or two mornings later, a garden scene was taking place upon the banks of the Clyde.

The grounds that stretched away on either side of the house were more elaborate and better kept, but at the same time they were less inviting and home-like than those which lay blazing under the July sun, in old-fashioned flower-beds, filled with scarlet geraniums and yellow calceolarias, in gaudy rows around Dorrington Hall.

The gardens at Fearn Castle were all hidden away by themselves within high walls, and there were acres of hot-houses, with glazed and painted roofs glittering in the sun, which made one hot to look at ; but around the spot where Harold and May had drawn out their garden-chairs there were no flowers at all, only wide-spreading velvet lawns, dotted over with rare shrubs, with deodaras, and " monkey puzzles," and dozens of different varieties of pine-trees.

All the old-fashioned charm of an English garden had been improved away by the talent of Mr. Crocker's

high-art Scotch gardeners. Neither were there, as at Dorrington, glimpses of the old oaks and elms in the park, and the buttercup-covered meadows beyond, with the sheep and the cows in the distance, slowly munching their way through the thick, sweet grass. But then there were, on the other hand, the waters of the Clyde, with the stream of never-ending shipping upon its broad bosom, and all the Argyle-shire mountains, red and purple with full-bloomed heather, beyond.

Mr. Dorrington and Miss Crocker sat each in a garden-chair, and were silent. May was reading, and upon Harold's knee lay an open letter which he had been reading, without apparently much pleasure in the perusal, to judge by his frowning brow, and the impatient way in which he pulled at his moustache.

Truth to say, it was not a letter which any one would have much cared to receive. It ran thus :

“DEAR HARULD,

“this is hopeing you are wel. I think you have been long enuf away with that hored woman with the munny, it is very dull for me and David Haythone keeps on worryin me to say I'll marry him, which I can't threw being engaged to you. You had better cum home. I'm goin up to the Hall to-morrow and think I'll show Miss Alice your leter as you rote promiseing to marry me, and aske her addvise.—your loveing

“ROSIE.

"P.S.—If you cum home strate I will not shew her yure leter.

"P.S.—plese bring me a nice present."

This elegant specimen, written in the most villanous handwriting, and covered with blots and smudges, had the effect of fillipg Harold's mind with disgust. It was not by any means the first letter of the sort which he had received ; but somehow in the early days when Rosie's fascination over him had been very powerful, the faults in spelling and the bad grammar had not struck him nearly so forcibly as they did to-day. There was, moreover, a new turn in Rosie's letters lately. She was always reverting now-a-days to that wretched promise to marry her, which he had been silly enough to commit to writing, and she always alluded to it with a sort of threat. No doubt if she chose to go up to the Hall whilst he was away and say anything of it to his family, she might make things very unpleasant for him ; so unpleasant indeed that Harold hardly liked to contemplate such a contingency.

He could not believe that she would actually take such a very strong step against him ; it would not be to her interest to do so in the long run ; and Harold felt sure that Rosie was too clever to risk her own interests ; still she was constantly threatening him, and these threats were eminently disagreeable to him.

It had come to this, that far away as he was now from the charm of her great beauty, he was beginning to regard Rosie Wood in the light of a cunning enemy who was plotting and planning against him.

He glanced up from that hateful letter at his companion. May sat cool and still in her white summer dress, with her eyes bent down upon the book upon her lap. The very sight of her was soothing and comforting to him; she looked so refined and dainty, with her sweet face absorbed with serious stillness.

There was nothing disturbing or jarring about May Crocker. Howsoever a man might be fretted or harassed, whatsoever might be the storms or the turmoils in his own mind, May's mood seemed always instinctively to fit in with the ruffled spirits and temper of those she was with.

What was it about her, Harold wondered, which made a man at rest to be with her, and which charmed him, in spite of himself, out of all his worries? Was it magic, or was it a sixth sense, that of acute though unspoken sympathy, with which one woman here and there is supernaturally gifted?

Harold caught himself envying the lucky fellow whose good fortune it would be to spend his life with May Crocker.

"Read to me," he said to her, suddenly, "just what you are reading to yourself. Don't go back or tell me what it is."

She just raised her eyes for a second with a half



smile, and then, as he told her, began simply, without a word, at the exact spot where she had been reading to herself :

“ To that high Capital where kingly Death  
Keeps his pale court in beauty and decay,  
He came ; and bought with price of purest breath  
A grave among the eternal——”

She read on through the next few cantos. Her voice, always a musical one, fitted the sweet, solemn words that fell from her lips. The utter silence of the summer morning, broken only by the occasional hum of an insect, or the gentle flutter of the breeze among the foliage, struck upon the young man's troubled soul with a sudden sense of rest and well-being. To sit and listen to her thus, was like an idyl of Paradise to him.

“ It is Shelley, is it not ? ” when, after a few verses, she paused.

“ Yes.” She closed the book gently, and her eyes wandered dreamily away towards the purple mountains.

“ How clever you are ! ” exclaimed Harold, enthusiastically. “ I think there is nothing beautiful you do not read and care for. I never see you wasting your time over trashy novels, as my sisters do.”

May laughed. “ Pray don't make me out a ‘ blue,’ ” she said, with a little blush ; “ I assure you I often read novels, and, do you know, I am rather ashamed of being so fond of poetry ; but I generally take a

book of poems into the garden because somehow it suits with the surroundings. One does not want to be too much absorbed ; one wants to look up, and to listen, and to dream between whiles. I am very fond of day-dreams, you know."

"Tell me your day-dreams. I wonder if they are at all like mine ?"

"Tell me yours first, then."

"Oh ! mine are not romantic. Lots of money, that's the main thing, I believe. All my debts paid ; an unlimited supply of hunters in the winter, and no end of fishing and shooting in the autumn. I don't believe my desires rise much higher than that."

May felt secretly unreasonably glad that there had been no mention of "that girl" in Harold's catalogue of delights.

"You will laugh at my dreams of happiness," she said, "they are very different from yours. I am always longing to be *quite* poor—to have no money at all ; to live in a little four-roomed cottage, with lots of books and music, and with nothing but cotton gowns to my back—and—and——," and here May came stammeringly to an end of her description, whilst a very vivid blush spread suddenly and swiftly over her face.

Harold bent forward looking eagerly at her, and Rosie's letter fluttered unheeded to the ground between them.

"Yes ?—and in this cottage—this paradise of books

and music—you would not be alone, I suppose? You would like some one to be with you—some one whom——”

In his eagerness he placed his hand upon hers, that lay crossed over Shelley's poems, and looked up into her face with eyes that, for Rosie Wood's lover, were strangely full of something that surely had no business to be in them. May drew back from him with a start and a little laugh.

“How ridiculously sentimental you are, Mr. Dorington,” she said, a little nervously; “that comes of being in love—you think everybody else wants to be in the same blissful condition of enchantment as yourself! I assure you there will be no love in *my* cottage—the height of my ambition is to die an old maid! Is not that the luncheon-bell? See, you have dropped your letter.”

Harold picked up his letter rather ruefully, and prepared to follow her up to the house. He felt a little savage with her, being a young man of an irritable and uncertain temper. She need not have snubbed him so sternly. He was not intending to make love to her, at least he thought not—he supposed not. But upon this point there appeared to be some vagueness in his own mind. It was just as well, perhaps, he reflected, as he walked along by her side in somewhat sulky silence, that she had pulled him up so sharply; but then what did the little witch mean by blushing in that delightful manner? It was enough to make

a man forget himself, and oh ! how different—how utterly different she was from Rosie Wood !

The day, begun so peacefully, ended with a catastrophe. Harold had now been five days at Fearn Castle. Sir John and Lady Harrison had left ; but still he stayed on, the only visitor. There was now no occasion for Mr. and Mrs. Crocker to plot and plan for “throwing the young people together.” The young people seemed only too willing to be so thrown. They made their plans independent of their elders, and carried them out perfectly to their own satisfaction. The worthy parents noted it all with secret delight.

“I do believe that May will have him !” said Mrs. Crocker triumphantly to her spouse. Mr. Crocker still had his doubts.

“Well, she does appear to like him ; but they don’t seem to get on any further. He has been here five days, Mary, why don’t he come to the scratch ?” he said.

This conversation had taken place that very morning in—if I may be allowed to mention such a situation—the conjugal couch of the good couple. The maid had brought in the hot water, and had drawn up the blinds ; but Mr. and Mrs. Crocker lay still among their pillows, discussing their daughter’s prospects.

“Why don’t he come to the scratch, that’s what I want to know ?” repeated Mr. Crocker, solemnly nodding his head. The head was adorned with a red

silk nightcap, such as our grandfathers were given to, finished off with a red tassel at the top. It was a veritable *bonnet rouge*, a similitude which, had it occurred to him, would have struck upon Mr. Crocker's new-born conservatism with horror. When Mr. Crocker nodded his head, the tassel nodded too. His wife, also arrayed about the head in a cap of antique date, bristling over with frills, with wide strings tied under her chin, such as her mother had worn before her, gently chided the good man for his impatience.

"You men are always in such a hurry; you don't give him time enough. That's why May has always given them their *congé*,"—impossible to render Mrs. Crocker's pronunciation of the French word; it was unique and entirely original—"she gets frightened. You let 'em be, John; slow and sure's the word."

"Well, my dear, I am sure I hope you are right; but if young Dorrington don't look sharp I shall get Alforth to come over again; that'll wake him up a bit; he'll get jealous."

"Why, John, May refused Lord Alforth right away; wouldn't so much as look at him! What is the good of his coming again?"

"Well, I had a letter from him yesterday, saying he'd like to come and try again. I expect he is hard up," said Mr. Crocker, naïvely. "Anyway, Mary, a lord's a lord all the world over, and Dorrington ain't one yet; and if your daughter don't see the difference, she hasn't so much sense as I give her credit for."

"Oh! John, May *hated* him; lord or no lord, she'll never have him."

"Well, she needn't tell Dorrington that; the little puss is quite sly enough to play off one lover against the other, and if she won't have Lord Alforth, she can lead him on a bit, and in that way she'll bring the other to the point. One or t'other, I don't mind which; she may take which she likes," added Mr. Crocker, with amiable liberality.

It was very evident that May was as little known and understood by either of her parents as if she had been a denizen of another planet.

But the immediate consequence of the above conversation was that May followed Harold into the billiard-room after luncheon with a face full of consternation.

"Oh, Mr. Dorrington!" she exclaimed, "papa has done such a dreadful thing!"

Harold, who was idly knocking the balls about, stopped short and inquired anxiously what had happened.

"He has written to ask Lord Alforth to come and stay here to-morrow! It appears that he has heard from him; he is going to the Highlands, and he has proposed to come here on his way."

"What a confounded nuisance he will be!"

"Do you know him, Mr. Dorrington?"

"What, Dolly Alforth? Oh! yes; we were at Eton together."

"What do you think of him?" asked May, rolling the red ball about from one hand to the other.

"Ass!" ejaculated Harold, tersely and emphatically.

"Fancy a *man* calling himself *Dolly*!" said May, scornfully.

"As long as *you* never call him so," began Harold, rather sentimentally.

"I?" interrupted May. "Why, I won't have anything to say to him—I mean," colouring suddenly—"I mean I don't like him at all!"

Harold turned round upon her.

"You mean," he said, savagely—"you mean he is one of your lovers; he is coming here to make love to you? I won't have it—it's not in our bargain—I won't stand it," he added, angrily.

"What a dog in the manger you are! You don't want me yourself, and yet you won't let any one else come near me!"

Harold leant over the billiard-table, made a cannon, and pocketed the red ball before he answered; then he said, very humbly:

"I am an awful fool, Miss Crocker. Well, then, let us have a drive in the pony-carriage together this afternoon—as it is our last day alone together," he added, dismally.

"I shall be delighted," said May, cheerfully. "Let us go by all means. By the way, I will try those new ponies papa has just bought for me; they have not

been driven together yet. We will see how they go. We will take a long drive, and no servant with us. If we go across country, through any by-lanes, you will have to open the gates. We shall be much more independent alone."

"Much," said Harold, with decision. "How long will you be—half an hour?"

"Yes, about that; ring the bell, please, Mr. Dorrington, and order it; and I will go and tell mamma what we have settled to do."



## CHAPTER IX.

## DOLLY ALFORTH'S WELCOME

THE two young people had started for their drive in the pony-carriage with the new ponies; and Mrs. Crocker, who had seen them off, with placid smiles of approval, turned from the door and went up to her own room to array herself in the afternoon grandeur of her violet silk and gold chains, which she was accustomed to don when she stopped at home in the expectation of visitors. As she passed a door, left inadvertently open by one of the maids, upon the back staircase, a strong whiff of hot boiling fruit came wafted up gratefully to her nose.

"They are making the strawberry jam," said Mrs. Crocker to herself, as she paused by the open door and sniffed the fragrant odour, and she wished devoutly that she might go down and help them. "No one ever could make strawberry jam as I could," she thought, regretfully; "they will make it either too stiff and bruise the fruit, or else they make it watery and nothing but syrup," and she sighed.

For the moment she wished herself back in the little six-roomed house in Glasgow, where she and her John

had begun life together with a couple of maids, and where it was not thought strange or indecorous for her to go down into the kitchen to superintend the cooking of their daily dinner, and even to manufacture a cake or a dish of light, flaky, feathery pastry herself with her own hands. Oh! how ardently she longed to tie on a big white apron now, over her fine clothes, to roll up her sleeves to the elbows, and go down into the kitchen and help cook and her two assistant kitchen-maids to concoct that strawberry jam, which she knew she could make so much better than they could.

“How they would stare!” said Mrs. Crocker to herself, with a certain sense of the ludicrous in her mind. “Ah, well! I suppose it would never do for Mrs. Crocker of Fearn Castle—John would be shocked.” So she shut the door to, with a sigh over the past delights of her youth, went upstairs to array herself in the glories of the violet silk, and then came down again to her grand drawing-room, that was all crimson satin and gilded glitter, and sat down over her crewels.

The afternoon was hot and sultry, and Mrs. Crocker soon fell to nodding over her wools. The elaborate design of the “School of Art” table-cover she was working grew but slowly under her fat red fingers. But Mrs. Crocker felt sure that “ladies” always sit in the afternoon over their fancy-work in their drawing-rooms, and not for worlds would she have

relinquished this tangible and visible sign of present "ladyhood."

In her youth they did bead-work and *broderie Anglaise*, now they cover brown linen with sickly blue worsted flowers and dirty green leaves. At her heart, Mrs. Crocker preferred the bead-mats, but May told her this was the fashionable work, and had brought her the materials from the School of Art, so Mrs. Crocker did what her daughter told her, and slaved away at her table-cover. But this afternoon, what with the heat and the silence, she found it harder than ever to get on with; her hands kept dropping languidly into her lap; her head nodded persistently, first forward, then backward. She made several vigorous efforts to fight against her drowsiness, but in the end she sank permanently back upon the cushions of her arm-chair, her mouth fell wide open, the crewels all slipped off her portly lap on to the floor—Nature triumphed over the "School of Art," and Mrs. Crocker slept.

A good smart thunder-shower came pattering down while she was asleep without rousing or disturbing her in the very least.

The first thing that roused her into renewed consciousness was the whistle of the five o'clock train from Glasgow. This, to her, suggestive sound, awoke her completely. The five o'clock train brought many pleasant possibilities with it to Mrs. Crocker's mind. It might bring her husband back. when, as to-day, he

had gone, as he still did two or three times a week, into Glasgow to look after the business from which, though he no longer took a very active part in it, he still derived a very large share of his income. The five o'clock train might bring him, and it might bring a chance friend or two to dinner; it might, nay, it invariably did, bring the fish, and often sundry other good things as well. Parcels, presents, letters, visitors, everything came by the five o'clock train out from Glasgow. It was the great event of the day to Mrs. Crocker. So no wonder that the good lady awoke at the pleasant sound of the railway-whistle, and went into the adjoining room which commanded a view of the entrance-gates and the road outside, along which anything of an exciting nature must arrive.

The station was but ten minutes' walk from the house, and little more than that time after the sound which had awakened her, Mrs. Crocker became aware of two figures coming along the road towards the lodge-gates—one a little in advance of the other. Neither of them could by any possibility be identified with her husband. Who could they be? As they came nearer she perceived that the second of the two was a railway-porter, bearing a bag and a good-sized portmanteau. At this sight Mrs. Crocker rang the bell violently.

"Tell Mrs. McCleod"—that was the housekeeper—"to have a bedroom got ready instantly, there's a gentleman coming up the road with a portmanteau."

“ Yes, ma’am ; which room ? ”

“ I doesn’t matter. Don’t stand staring at me. Duncan, but make haste about it. My goodness ! ” as the man vanished to fulfil her orders and she resumed her point of observation at the window—“ my goodness ! if it ain’t Alforth ! Fancy his having to walk up from the station, and nothing to meet him ? How vexed Mr. C. will be ! ”

The gentleman, followed by the porter, was by this time close to the house, and Mrs. Crocker retired rapidly into the drawing-room, and hastily took up her work again, in order to be, when the curtain rose upon the new-comer, discovered “ seated at work,” which was her idea of what was suitable and lady-like in a hostess under the circumstances. She would have thought it dreadfully shocking to have displayed any unusual flutter or excitement at the new arrival ; she would not have had her visitor know for worlds that she had spied him out coming along the road, and that the room was being hurriedly got ready, upstairs, and his sheets at that very moment airing at the kitchen fire.

“ I feel in a tremble all over,” said Mrs. Crocker, to herself, as she tried vainly to bring her mind to bear upon the right shade of her muddy green worsteds. “ Fancy his turning up like this, without warning ! I doubt very much how May will take it, and Crocker is in his favour, too. Law ! how my heart does beat.” A physical result due partly indeed to her dread of

May's proving restive at this second lover being introduced upon the scene, but partly also to the natural commotion of mind produced by the advent of a real "live lord," which is ineradicable in the breasts of persons who, like Mrs. Crocker, have risen in the social scale to a status to which they are unfitted by birth and breeding.

Not that Adolphus, Lord Alforth, was by any means an alarming or imposing sample of the aristocracy. As he was ushered in by Mrs. Crocker's tall powdered footman, who towered above his head in all the dignity of six foot in his stockings, anything less calculated to inspire awe in the bosoms of his fellow-creatures than little Dolly Alforth could hardly be imagined.

Indeed, had not one known him to be a peer of the realm, one might have more easily supposed him to be accustomed to the measuring of tapes and ribbons behind a counter. He was a very small man, rather addicted to jewellery and bright-coloured ties, and a little bit "horsey" in the cut of his garments. He used a profusion of scent and hair-oil, and his baby moustache was waxed up fiercely into two alarming-looking spikes. He had a very snub little nose, and a little round button of a mouth, and in one of his insignificant little blue eyes was stuck an eyeglass, which was perpetually dropping out; and in the effort to counteract this tendency he had acquired a sort of screw in the muscles of one side of his face, which

gave him at times a most comical effect. In spite of this unprepossessing appearance, Lord Alforth was by no means a bad little fellow; he had a soul too big for his body, and the warmest heart in the world. On the whole, though women did not favour him, men liked him and made much of him, and that of itself speaks well for a man. They laughed at him a little, it is true, but all in a kindly spirit; and to his friends, Lord Alforth was always "little Dolly."

"I hope you will forgive me, Mrs. Crocker, for taking you by surprise in this way," he said, when he was ushered into the room; "fact is, I came up to Scotland two days sooner than I expected. I did write to Mr. Crocker, and I knew how hospitable you always are, I thought I would come over and see if you could put me up for a day or two."

"Dear me, I'm sure we are delighted."

"I hope I haven't disturbed you in an afternoon nap, eh?"

"Oh, dear no!" Mrs. Crocker said blushing. "I was busy—working."

"And—and Miss May?" inquired Dolly, looking round the room a little nervously. "I—I trust she is quite well?"

"Quite, thanks, Lord Alforth. Just now I am quite alone; Mr. Crocker has gone to Glasgow. I wonder he didn't come out by the same train you came by. You saw nothing of him, I suppose?"

"No, I did not see him; but is Miss May gone into

Glasgow too?" persisted Dolly, bringing in her name once more, with, it would seem, something of an effort.

"Oh! no, May is gone out driving. A gentleman is with her; they have been gone some time; they ought to be home soon."

Poor Mrs. Crocker felt quite guilty at having to own to the presence of the other lover.

As to Dolly, he answered "Oh!" and stared down into his hat, which he held between his knees.

"The gentleman," continued Mrs. Crocker, rushing bravely at it, for she felt she must make a clean breast of what was going on in the family—"the gentleman is Mr. Dorrington; perhaps you know him, Lord Alforth?"

"What, Harold Dorrington?" cried Dolly, looking up. "Of course I know him; he was at Eton with me. Capital fellow, Harold Dorrington!" and then he sighed, and looked down again at his hat.

Here, Dolly felt instinctively, was a rival, already in possession of the field, but he was not such a sneak as to cry a rival down behind his back. "Fair play," was Dolly's motto, and he stuck to his principles like a man.

"Well, Mrs. Crocker," he said presently, "I suppose you guess pretty well what I am here about—fact is, I thought I'd have another try—it's nearly six months ago, you know, since Miss May gave me that facer, and six months is a long time; girls generally change their mind twice a year at the least—do you



think *she* has? You are her mother, you ought to know." And Dolly looked up anxiously into Mrs. Crocker's fat countenance, as one looks at an oracle; but unfortunately his eyeglass took the opportunity of springing out of his eye, so that he was unable to note correctly the expression of her face. By the time he had replaced it, Mrs. Crocker was looking down into her work-basket, hunting nervously among her worsted for a missing skein.

"Law! you mustn't ask *me*, Lord Alforth. I'm sure I never know what to say about May; she's such a queer, wilful kind of girl."

"She isn't engaged to Dorrington, is she?" inquired the young man, with some agitation.

"Oh! bless you, no; she don't seem to care for him a bit more than for any of the others," admitted Mrs. Crocker, incautiously.

"Look here," said Dolly: "I know what she thinks of me, Mrs. Crocker; she thinks I am after her money, and perhaps I was a bit at first, you know; but when I came to know her, I never thought any more about it—upon my soul I didn't. I got to love her for herself—who could help it!" added Dolly, with emotion; "but that's what she won't believe. If you could help me, Mrs. Crocker, to persuade her——"

"Hush!" interrupted that lady, suddenly lifting up her hand. "I hear the pony-carriage—she is coming back."

There was a sound of wheels outside on the drive

—wheels driven along furiously and rapidly—there was a little commotion heard in the hall, a confusion of footsteps, and a door violently banged. In another instant May, white as a sheet, and trembling in every limb, tore breathlessly into the room. She never even saw Lord Alforth, but sank forward upon her knees before her mother's chair, burying her face in her lap.

“ Oh ! mother, mother ! ” she cried, in a piercing voice of anguish and horror, “ he is dead !—he is dead !—and I have killed him ! ”

## CHAPTER X.

## THE ROAD BY THE RAILWAY

It may as well be stated at once, distinctly and decidedly, that Harold Dorrington was not dead. Nor—although, at the time of May's abrupt and agitated outburst of terror and dismay in her mother's drawing-room, he was actually lying by the roadside, senseless, upon a heap of stones about a mile from the house—was he in the slightest danger of wending his way to another and a better world.

What had happened was this. The ponies, as I have said, were on their trial. They had never been driven together before: indeed, they had not been driven at all for some time. They were consequently very fresh. But May was a very good whip, and was rather vain of her driving, and everything went well through the best part of the drive.

When they were about two miles from the house, on their way home, they came to a portion of the road which ran for about a quarter of a mile alongside of the railway, without either wall or hedge to screen it in the very least from the passing trains.

There was another way which they might take if

they chose, and so avoid this dangerous quarter of a mile altogether. It is true that this would take them a good three miles out of the direct road home, but Harold gave it as his strong advice that May should adopt that discretion which is the better part of valour, and go home by the longer way, so avoiding the railway road altogether.

"They are quite fresh enough as it is," he said, "and a train is a severe trial, even to quiet horses. Besides, the five o'clock train must be due. Do not be so foolish as to risk it."

But May resented the good advice altogether.

"Nonsense," she said. "I can hold them perfectly, and if they are to be the least use to me, they must learn to get accustomed to this bit of road, for I am constantly obliged to come home by it."

Moreover, May was foolish enough, let it be frankly owned, to suspect Harold of a desire to prolong the *tête-à-tête* drive by those additional three miles.

The suspicion angered and irritated her. He had no right, she said to herself, to avow to her openly his affection for that horrid, dreadful, low woman; to ask for her sympathy and her interest with one breath, and then with the next to assume a lover-like aspect toward herself, and to evince a weakness for lingering unduly in her society.

It was time, said May to herself, as she whipped up her ponies defiantly along the lower road—it was time to put a stop to this philandering, to this playing

at love-making. It began to hurt and pain her inconceivably at every turn; it angered her that it should be so; surely, the game, which she herself had suggested, was being played at now all too terribly in earnest. This sort of thing must end, May said to herself; a little self-control, a little strength of mind on her part, and it could be done, she felt sure.

"I see no reason for going three miles out of our way," she said coldly, in answer to her companion's continued remonstrances upon her fool-hardiness; "I am not at all afraid of the train."

As this was a polite intimation that possibly somebody else might be afraid, Harold held his tongue, and awaited the issues of fate.

What happened was exactly what he had anticipated. At the most defenceless part of the whole road the five o'clock train, the same which had brought little Lord Alforth from Glasgow, came rushing along to meet them.

The ponies stopped dead short, snorting and quivering; then they turned violently round, jerking the carriage after them, and bolted as hard as they could lay legs to the ground back along the road they had come.

May was of course utterly powerless to stop them. They dashed round a sharp curve, and the hind wheels coming in contact with a heap of granite by the roadside, the carriage was upset.

Mr. Dorrington was flung out one side and Miss Crocker the other.

By this time the train had passed on ahead, and the ponies, having worked as much mischief as in them lay, and being on the whole well-intentioned animals, seeing the cause of their senseless terror receding rapidly in the distance, were not minded to follow it. They came to a standstill of their own accord, and stood, trembling and covered with foam, peaceably in the middle of the road, feeling, it is to be hoped, thoroughly ashamed of their escapade.

As for May, she lifted herself up from the grass by the roadside on which she had fallen, somewhat stiff and shaken, but otherwise quite unhurt by the accident. What, however, was her horror on calling out to her companion, to find that he did not answer her ; and when she hastened to his side she found that he was quite unconscious, his head having fallen upon a heap of stones.

What passed in the next few minutes is what nobody but herself and the two recalcitrant little ponies ever exactly could say, and they were all three remarkably reticent upon the subject. But in after-years May herself was known to make some partial and hesitating revelations as to what had taken place.

From them it has been gathered that she said and did a succession of highly indecorous things ; that she made a statement of her own sentiments, more distinct than maidenly, to what she considered to be the

inanimate corpse of Rosie Wood's lover; that she wrung her hands in hopeless agony over the fate of this young man, whom her own headstrong folly had brought to so sorry a plight; and, finally, that she supported his yellow head upon her breast, and rained down tears, and perhaps something even tenderer and fonder, upon his pale and senseless face.

Of course this is all a matter of conjecture, but Harold always declared that when he recovered his consciousness there were unmistakable tears—such as he will stake his existence he never could have shed himself—upon his face.

This scene, however, was of very short duration, for providentially three labourers, returning home from their day's work, just now appeared along the road.

With their help the little carriage, which beyond a few scratches was quite uninjured, was restored to the perpendicular, and the ponies once more securely attached to it.

Then, leaving one of the men in charge of what she believed to be Harold's dead or dying body, May drove home as fast as ever she could induce the ponies to go, in order to summon assistance, for she did not dare to bring him home herself lest the shaking of the carriage should utterly extinguish any flicker of life there might still be left to him.

And so it was that she rushed into the room and fell prone at her mother's knee, utterly regardless and

unconscious of the presence of that other lover who sat there so anxiously wondering over his fate at her hands.

Which was a pleasant greeting for poor Dolly Alforth.

Five minutes after Miss Crocker's precipitate return to her father's house, all the inhabitants thereof were in a state of activity and commotion.

One man was despatched for the village doctor, another with a telegram to the station to summon a great physician from Glasgow, and the rest of the male beings of the household, with Lord Alforth at their head, sallied forth armed with shutter, mattress, and pillows, to bring home the injured hero as speedily as might be.

As to Mrs. Crocker and May, they were not idle in the interim, but busied themselves in preparing the sick-room, and in ordering all sorts of possible and impossible things which might be required by the doctors on their arrival.

Mr. Crocker, on reaching his home during this condition of things, thought at first that his family and household had taken leave of their senses.

Poor Harold was brought home still unconscious, lying back very white and still upon his mattress, everybody looking solemn and frightened at the sight.

The maids all cried, and went into different stages of hysterics, whispering among themselves that he was dead, whilst Mrs. Crocker scolded them lustily



for a set of fools, and sent them flying off in different directions.

As to poor May, she stood shivering and shaking in a doorway, watching the ghastly procession wind its way across the hall and upstairs to the bedroom, and she said to herself that if Harold Dorrington were never more to open his eyes and smile at her, if the colour of youth and health were never to return to his white face, nor his pleasant voice to sound ever again on her ear, then indeed her own life was no longer worth having, but that to die herself and be buried by his side was the only thing which would be left her to desire.

But Fate had mercifully no such dire consummation in store for her.

Harold recovered his consciousness almost as soon as he reached his own bedroom, and the doctors, arriving soon after, pronounced him to be suffering from a not very severe concussion of the brain. They ordered perfect quiet and a darkened room, ice to his head, and next to nothing to eat for a week, by which time, as he had sustained no other injuries of any kind, they stated it as their opinion that he would in all probability be quite well again.

They did not even think it necessary that Mr. Crocker should send for his father and mother, or alarm his family in any way ; in fact, the quieter and the freer from excitement and agitation he was kept, and the fewer people admitted to the sick-room the better for

their patient, and the faster he would be likely to recover.

Fearn Castle was instantly converted into a hospital ward. Mrs. Crocker and the housekeeper constituted themselves head nurses, and spent the greater part of their days in the sick-room, to the door of which flowed a constant stream of attendant damsels, bearing chicken-broth and beef-tea, lemons, ice, and medicine bottles, which were taken in mysteriously, and reappeared in due course of time in the shape of empty cups and glasses.

Mr. Crocker judiciously kept out of the way, and went into Glasgow regularly every day, whilst Lord Alforth mooned about the gardens by himself, pilfering the fruit from the hot-houses, and cursing his remarkably bad luck.

For let not any one imagine that Dolly reaped the very smallest advantage out of the situation with regard to May. If at the outset he had fondly nourished any hopes of the kind, those hopes had been very speedily crushed within him.

May was no more to be tempted into a stroll round the garden or a row upon the river with him than if her own mother had lain dying. He had been rash enough to suggest something of the kind the day after the accident, when no one with any sense could have had the faintest excuse for feeling anxious on Harold's account, and his suggestions had been met with indignation.

"How can you be so unfeeling as to think of such a thing as going on the river and amusing ourselves," cried May, "when poor Mr. Dorrington is lying there so ill?"

"But he is better, I thought; he will be all right in a few days; it couldn't hurt him if we went out for a couple of hours; besides, he would never know it," added Dolly, weakly. Whereat Miss Crocker got very angry.

"Never know it! That is a kind thing to say about a man you were at school with, and whom you say is your friend! You would do an unkind, heartless action, and salve it over to your conscience because the poor fellow is weak and ill, and would not know of it! Pretty friendship that is!"

"Miss May, you are very illogical," said Dolly, not without reason. And then May began to cry.

Lord Alforth took her hand, and looked at her with all his soul in his little weak-sighted eyes.

"Tell me, my dear—he loves you, May. Is that it? If that is so, I will go away and never worry you any more. Is it so?"

"I don't know what you mean, Lord Alforth," cried May, wrenching away her hand passionately. "Mr. Dorrington is nothing to me but a great friend of papa's; and he's very kind—and—and I have always liked him. It has nothing in the world to do with love. *Love*, indeed! Why, he is engaged to

somebody else ; ” and she laughed, but the laugh was not a very genuine one.

“ Engaged, is he ? ” cried Dolly, eagerly, with a display of glee at the intelligence which a wiser man would have taken care to conceal. “ Oh ! I am *very* glad indeed to hear that ! Dear old Harold ! I am sure I hope he will be very happy ! ”

To which May answered nothing, but felt within her an overpowering desire to box his little lordship’s ears—a desire which only good manners induced her to keep in check ; but it will be imagined that Dolly had not at all advanced his cause by the above conversation.

So his lady-love gave him very little of her society, and he wandered about disconsolately by himself, and rather wished he had not come at all.

As to May, she hung about the passages and stairs in the vicinity of Mr. Dorrington’s chamber in a state of aimless disquietude. She could settle to no occupation, nor find pleasure in anything. If she saw a housemaid coming along with a tray, she hastened forward to take it out of her hands and to carry it herself to the door of the sick-room. There her mother or Mrs. McCleod would open the door a little way and take it from her, and answer her whispered inquiries with reassuring accounts of progress. How dearly May would have liked to have been admitted to the sick-chamber, and to have taken her turn at watching and tending the invalid, no one ever knew

but herself. But there were the decorums of life to be observed ; and such a proceeding was, she knew, absolutely impossible. She could only carry the trays of chicken-broth and lemonade to his door, and fly about the house on her mother's messages—things which any housemaid could have done quite as well, but which May loved to do herself ; being, as she told herself, all she could do to prove her repentance for having been the cause of his accident by her headstrong obstinacy.

May was quite sure that repentance and remorse were the only reasons by which she was actuated. In fact, this deluded young woman stated it as a positive fact so very often to herself, that in the end she came almost to believe in the truth of her own fervent self-protestations !

## CHAPTER XI.

## TWO PROPOSALS

IT was at this juncture, while things were in this condition, that the infatuated Dolly was tempted to try his fate once more at Miss Crocker's hands. No more inopportune moment could possibly have been selected by him ; but, seeing that he was goaded on to this deed of desperation by Miss Crocker's own father, he is hardly, perhaps, to be considered entirely responsible for the utter failure which ensued.

Mr. Crocker, who, as it has been stated, had but an imperfect comprehension of his daughter's character and disposition, was of opinion that the present opportunity—now that “the other” was ill in bed and well out of the way—was a very fine one for the furtherance of Lord Alforth's wishes. Mr. Crocker had always favoured Dolly's suit. It is true that, failing him, he had not considered Harold Dorrington an unsuitable match for his daughter ; but that was before Dolly had shown any symptoms of returning to the charge, after his former discomfiture some five or six months ago. Now that he had come forward again, Mr. Crocker felt himself less keen concerning the Dorrington alliance.

Harold, whatever might be his future prospects—and they might be very far in the future indeed—could not be compared, in his mind, to an earl *in esse*, who had no one's death to wait for, and who could bear off his bride as a full-fledged countess from her father's door.

He knew that his wife was in favour of Harold's handsome face and bright, winning manner; but as Mrs. Crocker was now much occupied in the sick-room, he did not think that he would trouble her upon the subject just at present. So he took upon himself to advise Lord Alforth upon his own responsibility to press May for an answer now at once, whilst, as he imagined, Harold's influence was temporarily in abeyance.

So it was that the unfortunate nobleman waylaid May one morning in the passage, just at the top of the front staircase, up which the footman might at any minute appear with the letters—with a fine, commanding view, on one side, of a long passage down which housemaids were in the habit of constantly passing, and of an open window on the other, through which a detachment of gardeners with the mowing-machine could perfectly well both see and be seen. At this slightly public spot Lord Alforth stopped his lady-love, and requested her to give him five minutes' conversation.

“ Oh ! not now, Lord Alforth ; I am just going out to pick some roses ! ” said May.

! "Then I will come with you and help you," answered Dolly.

"Oh! no you won't!" laughed May; for the roses were intended for Harold's room, and she certainly did not intend that one of them should be gathered by any other hands but her own. "I don't want your help at all; but, if you really want to speak to me, I will wait five minutes now—only make haste about it!"

This was by no means an encouraging beginning; and Dolly's courage, which was of the quality known as "Dutch," was fast oozing away. He began, however, to open his case, and blundered flounderingly and awkwardly into a statement of his sentiments.

As soon as May had gathered, from his broken sentences and hesitating speech, what was the purport of the communication he was desirous of making to her, a sense of the intense unsuitableness of the situation caused her to back hastily into her mother's boudoir, the door of which stood open immediately behind her.

"Good gracious, Lord Alforth! the servants will hear you!" she said, in a horror-struck whisper. "For Heaven's sake, come in here!"

Dolly followed her, and within the shelter of the room made a fresh start. But, somehow, whilst assuring her of his undying and consuming affection, and whilst swearing to devote his life to her service, his eye-glass, in the agitation of the moment, lost its place,



and came flying straight out of his eye at a tangent, and his face being at the moment somewhat near to May's, the eye-glass hit her pretty sharply on the nose.

May said, "Oh!" and put her hand up to her face; and then she could not help laughing.

Now, when a young lady laughs in the very middle of a gentleman's proposal, that gentleman may as well consider his cause to be hopeless at once.

Even Dolly, whose perceptions were not specially acute, could see this. He drew back suddenly from her, and coloured deeply.

"I see you will not listen to me, or believe me," he said, sadly.

"Oh! Lord Alforth! did we not have all this out long ago—last winter?" said May, feeling repentant. "I am very sorry you have spoken like this to me again; you should have taken the answer I gave you then."

"I could not do so—I could not give you up so easily," he answered.

And then May was silent; but a little smile that was distinctly contemptuous curled the corners of her mouth. At the sight of that smile, which meant a great deal, Dolly burst forth impetuously:

"I know quite well what you are thinking. You think it is for your money I want you! You are mistaken, May—I love you for yourself! You have been so accustomed to be run after for your money, that

you do not know what true love is when you meet with it! I wish you had not a farthing in the world, that I might prove to you the truth of what I am saying."

"When I have not a farthing in the world you shall ask me again, Lord Alforth," said May; and then she turned away from him and went to the window, and watched the gardeners and the mowing-machine on the lawn, and the little fat donkey that was dragging it up and down.

She felt a little bit sorry for her last speech, and wondered if, perhaps, after all, he was right and she was wrong, and that she was too ready to attribute mercenary motives to the men who came to woo her.

But after all, thought May, with a sigh, it could make no difference to her own fate.

She turned round again, and spoke more gently than she had hitherto done, holding out her hand to him as she spoke:

"Have I done you an injustice, Lord Alforth? If so, I am sorry; indeed I am. But it can never alter things for you and me. I must tell you that I have made up my mind never, never to marry. Nothing can alter that determination; it is quite irrevocable. I am going to take to cats, and a parrot, and a companion, to found a set of almshouses, and to build a hospital for sick children, to which I shall eventually leave all my money, and I am going to die an old maid."

"*You* an old maid! Impossible!"

"You will see it will be the case. But oh! Lord Alforth, don't owe me a grudge for refusing you again; indeed I can't help it, and if you will be my friend I should be so grateful. It seems to me," added May, her eyes filling with sudden tears, "that women can get plenty of lovers in this world; there is never any trouble about that; but a friend, that is such a rare thing!"

What could Dolly do but bend over her outstretched hand—the little hand that was so tempting in its pink-and-white delicacy—and kiss it devoutly and rapturously, vowing to be anything to her she wished—friend or lover—to his dying day.

So after that May went forth, somewhat slowly and sadly, to gather her roses, whilst Dolly went up to his room to pack his portmanteau.

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later Harold and May are walking together slowly through the shrubby paths.

Harold is no longer considered an invalid, but he still looks a little pale and pulled down, and it is his first walk out of doors.

It is not at all a nice day; the sunshine and the heat have taken their departure, and in their place there are lowering clouds and a little moaning breeze that rustles and shivers among the tree-tops.

It is not cold, but "soft," as Scotch weather more often is, and all the mountains on the further side of the Clyde are shrouded in thick veils of mist.

"I am so sorry it is not a finer day for you," says May, who has discarded her white dresses and wears a close-fitting dark serge. "Are you sure I am not walking too fast?"

"Quite sure. You must not treat me as an invalid any longer, I am really perfectly well now. I wish I could feel feeble enough to ask you for the help of your hand."

"Would it help you?" holding it out readily  
"Why not take it if you want it, Mr. Dorrington?"

"Of course I want it, but not in the sense you mean," said Harold, laughing a little. He just touched it caressingly; but May snatched it hastily back, with her cheeks all aflame.

"Mr. Dorrington," she said, suddenly, after a somewhat awkward silence had fallen between them for a few minutes, "if you are really feeling quite strong and well, there is something I want to say to you."

"I am well and strong enough to listen to anything, Miss May; let us sit down here and have it out."

They sat down on a garden bench, side by side.

The ground sloped suddenly away before them, and through an opening cut in the trees was the ever-lovely view of the Clyde and its shipping, and glimpses of the mist-shrouded mountains beyond.

"Mr. Dorrington, do you know that you have been here more than three weeks?" began May.

"Yes; but the last ten days I have been here by force of circumstances over which I had no control," answered Harold, who guessed what was coming.

"That is true; but even allowing for that, you have stayed longer than the time you fixed, and if you are quite well and strong again now——"

"Do you mean to give me my marching orders, Miss May? I thought you Scotch people were so hospitable!"

"You know very well it is not a question of hospitality, Mr. Dorrington. Do you remember our plan—our compact?"

"Perfectly."

"If you remember, you were to stay a week, in order to satisfy the suspicions of your father, and then you were to propose to me, and I was to refuse you."

"Yes," said Harold, looking at her, whilst May looked out over the Clyde.

They were both silent for a minute. Then Harold said—

"Well?"

"Well, you had better do it now," said May; and then they both laughed, which was perhaps the best thing they could do under the circumstances.

"Of all the extraordinary situations in life which I was ever placed in, this one is the most remarkable," said Harold, seriously, prodding the gravel with his walking-stick. Then there was another silence.

"I am waiting, Mr. Dorrington," said May, composedly, after a minute or two.

"What a farce this is!" cried Harold, suddenly, turning to her. "Oh! May, what am I to say to you?"

"Play the farce out quickly," she answered, whilst her heart beat tumultuously.

"What shall I say?" repeated Harold, helplessly.

"Say? Oh! anything; what does it matter? Say that I am lovely, and that you adore me. You really must propose, or how am I to refuse you?"

Then there was another silence. Suddenly, Harold stood up before her, and held out his hands to her.

"May," he said, in a low voice, looking at her fixedly, "you know very well that I love you."

"That is not a proposal," said May, nervously, looking past him across the river.

"Are you bent upon refusing me, then?"

"Surely. Is not that what we settled?"

"You will not marry me, then?"

"No." Something rising in her throat seemed suddenly to choke her, but with an effort she laughed, and the laugh was almost hysterical.

"Now go and pack your things; that is what they all do directly—it is the signal!" and May's laughter became inextinguishable, though what she was laughing at she would have been puzzled to say.

As to Harold, he stood and looked at her with a strange yearning in his face.

"I suppose," he said, slowly, "it is what I ought to expect."

"Of course; is it not what we settled?" she asked him for the second time. "You might thank me for helping you out of your dilemma."

"Thank you," said Harold, mechanically.

May suddenly got up and left him standing there. She went swiftly away from him, through the shadowy shrubbery paths into the house, straight upstairs into her own room.

And then, locking the door behind her, she stood quite still for a minute; suddenly wringing her hands together, she cried out aloud:

"Oh! what a fool—what a fool I am!" and, sinking down by her bedside, she buried her face among the pillows, and burst into a passion of tears.

## CHAPTER XII.

## LADY HARRISON'S ADVICE.

EARLY the following morning Harold Dorrington took his departure from Fearn Castle and returned to Sir John Harrison's. There was no parting between him and May. May had pleaded a headache and had dined in her own room, and when she came down very late the next morning, the visitor was already gone. But Mr. Crocker was very angry indeed with his daughter. When Lord Alforth had mysteriously and suddenly taken his departure a week ago, Mr. Crocker, at his wife's entreaties, had foreborne to reproach her. Mrs. Crocker had assured her husband that May had become attached to Harold, and that it was for that reason alone that the Earl had been sent about his business. But when it came to the second lover also being sent away in the same sudden and mysterious manner, then Mr. Crocker's indignation knew no bounds.

It seemed to him that his daughter was bent upon thwarting him, and that his wife connived at her disobedience and perversity.

Poor Mrs. Crocker was the recipient of the first



outburst of his anger, and upon her devoted head—is it not for that that a man's wife is given him?—were outpoured the vials of his wrath. Mrs. Crocker wept bitterly, and declared herself “as innocent as the babe unborn,” but her lord and master was by no means melted at the sight of her tears, nor would he believe in her protestations of ignorance of what had been going on.

“It is all a plant between you,” said Mr. Crocker, angrily; and then came May's turn.

He rang the bell, and sent a message to his daughter to come to him in his study.

May came creeping in, looking white and wearied; it was evident that the headache had been no mere pretext.

“Now, my lass, I must know the meaning of this,” began her father in his most autocratic manner.

“The meaning of what, papa?”

“You know very well. You have sent Mr. Dorrington away. Two men in one week, May; it's more than any father can stand!”

“I couldn't marry them both, papa,” said May, with a faint attempt at jocularly.

“I wouldn't have objected to either,” said her father, not deigning to notice May's trivial remark, “though naturally I favoured Lord Alforth the most, but your mother assured me you had a good cause for refusing him, and that you meant to accept Dorrington; but he told me last night you would not have him. I want to know the meaning of it, May.”

May stood before him with clasped hands and a white set face looking past him out of the window.

“One cannot give a reason for these things, papa,” she answered, in a low, steadfast voice.

“You are enough to break my heart!” cried her father, distractedly. “I have been a good father to you, and indulged you in every possible way, and I get nothing but ingratitude and disobedience in return. I am sick of these perpetual refusals.”

“And I am sick of being held up to auction!” cried May, passionately.

“If you are not married by next Christmas I will leave every penny away from you to your aunt’s children!” said her father, angrily.

“Nothing would please me better,” answered May.

What was a man to do with a daughter like this? Mr. Crocker foamed and fumed; he stalked up and down the room, and brandished his fists about, and dropped his h’s freely, lapsing into the vernacular of his youth as he always did when unduly excited. He might as well have spared himself the trouble: he made about as much impression upon his daughter as did the angry little waves that dashed themselves helplessly against the sea-wall at the bottom of his own garden.

May sat on the arm of a low chair, played idly with her watch-chain, and looked dreamily out towards the distant hills.

“What is the use of being so angry, papa?” she

said, at length, when her father's fury had somewhat exhausted itself. "Why cannot you and mamma be content to keep me at home? I am your only child. You need not be in such a hurry to get rid of me. If you wish for my real happiness, which, I suppose, is your main object, you should let me live at home in peace, and not torment me to marry any one."

"Do you mean to tell me you will not marry any one?"

"Yes, that is what I do mean. It is best that we should understand each other, is it not?"

After that Mr. Crocker felt that he could not trust himself to say a single word more; he could not strike his daughter, and yet that is what he felt inclined to do. He left the room in anger, slamming the door violently behind him, and for the next two days he would not speak to May. She was made to feel herself in disgrace, like a naughty child. If she came into a room her father walked out of it. If she spoke to him he would not answer her; whilst her mother looked oppressively miserable, and spent her time in sighing and whimpering behind her pocket-handkerchief. All this was very unpleasant to poor May.

Meanwhile, Harold Dorrington lingered on still at the Harrisons', fifteen miles off. He had meant to go home at once, but had persuaded himself that to do so would be wanting in civility to the kind old couple, whose guest he had originally been before his ill-starred visit to Fearn Castle.

It was very dull at the Harrisons'; he wandered about the garden, and strolled aimlessly in and out of the stables, with his hands in his pockets and a cigar between his lips; or he took his gun and shot a few rabbits, shooting very badly, and wishing himself anywhere but where he was. But still he said no word about going south again.

The first day that he got there he thought a great deal about Rosie. He stuck her photograph upon his dressing-table and looked at it a great many times whilst he was dressing for dinner. It was only a cheap photograph, in a common little sixpenny frame, but the lovely face smiled pleasantly at him, and reminded him of many happy moments spent in her society. All the time he had been at Fearn Castle he had never looked at it once. Nor had he answered any of those letters which, read in the atmosphere of May's attractiveness, had seemed to him to be—what indeed they were—so under-bred and so unbecoming. He took them out and re-read them; they appeared to him to bear a different meaning now.

“Poor little Rosie! she at least loves me sincerely—I am all the world to her—and the other cares nothing for me. A man ought to stick to the woman who really loves him whatever she may be. Of course Rosie is not a lady; but she is clever enough to adapt herself to any position in life; and how beautiful she is! But the great thing is, that she loves me. I might do a great deal worse than marry Rosie; she

will make me a dear little wife, and I shall be happier than all Miss Crocker's money could make me!"

Harold said all this aloud to himself; and such is the power of self-delusion inherent in our fallen nature, that he thoroughly believed he meant what he was saying. He even congratulated himself upon his honourable conduct in keeping true to his village love in spite of the temptations held out by the heiress. He raised Rosie's photograph to his lips, and then sat down, whilst the flush of enthusiasm for her was still hot upon him, and wrote to her:

"MY DEAREST LITTLE ROSIE.

"I am coming home in a day or two. Don't be angry with me for staying away so long. I have a dreadful confession to make to you, my darling—but it is best to tell you the truth. I *did* propose to the rich young lady, for of course her money is a great temptation to a poor man like myself, and, moreover, my father would have been so angry with me if I had not. But, most providentially, she has refused me, so now I come back to you with a clear conscience. How glad I shall be to see your pretty face again! I have seen no one so pretty as you, darling, since I have been away. I have not got you a present yet, but shall go to Glasgow on my way home and buy you something.

"Your loving

"HAROLD."

This letter Harold wrote late at night, and then took downstairs and dropped it into the letter-box in the hall, which was cleared for the early post at eight o'clock in the morning.

By the time that he came down to breakfast, at half-past nine, the letter was well on its way to Dorrington, and by that time Harold would have given his right hand to have recalled it.

For, after a night spent in restless tossing to and fro upon his bed, and in fitful dreams, in which one woman's face was always present to him, and that face never Rosie's, but always May's, Harold woke up feverish, unrested, and unhappy, and with returning daylight his self-delusions seemed to have vanished and faded away. Why had he got that aching pain at his heart, that angry disinclination to recall her image to his fancy, that sore wounded recollection of that last scene with her in the shrubbery? Was it for love of Rosie Wood that these things oppressed and distracted him? What had been the true meaning of that foolish, senseless proposal? Was it, indeed, a farce on both sides? or was it not, rather, bitter earnest indeed to himself—and to her—what?

Harold sprung from his bed and rang the bell violently.

"Go and see if the letters have gone," he said to the valet who answered his summons. "I want to stop one I wrote last night."

"The letters have left half an hour ago, sir," answered the man.

And then Harold used some exceedingly bad language.

"I would give ten years of my life not to have written it," he said bitterly to himself. For was it not a tissue of lies from beginning to end?

How insane, how mad he had been to write such a letter: what could have possessed him? He tossed Rosie's photograph back into his portmanteau without so much as looking at it. There was no other woman but May in the world for him to-day.

All breakfast-time he was silent and abstracted, and afterwards he went out and strolled wretchedly up and down the wide stone terrace in front of the windows, with his head bent moodily downwards, and without even the solace of his cigar.

"My dear boy," said a voice beside him—he turned hastily and confronted Lady Harrison—"my dear boy, you will excuse an old woman, won't you? I can see you are not happy. Perhaps, if you were to tell me about it, I might help you."

"You are very kind, Lady Harrison," looking away rather confusedly. "I don't know that any one can help me. I have only made a fool of myself," said poor Harold, with a rueful smile.

"That is to say," said the old lady, laying her hand kindly on his arm—"that is to say, that May has refused you?"

Harold coloured.

"My dear boy, girls so often don't know their own minds at first, and they are so sorry afterwards for it. Will you take an old woman's advice? You know I was young once, and remember what girls used to feel. Well, then, be guided by me: wait here patiently for two days, and then borrow Sir John's mare, and ride over to Fearn Castle after breakfast and see May again. Think over what I say, my dear Mr. Dorrington;" and with another kind, motherly little pat of her hand, the good lady left him.

So it came to pass that on the third day Harold said to her, blushing like a girl as he spoke:

"I think I will take your advice, Lady Harrison. Will Sir John lend me a hack, do you think?"

When Harold reached Fearn Castle it was about half-past two. The place looked unusually quiet.

Mr. Crocker, the butler said, was gone into Glasgow, Mrs. Crocker was out driving, and had lunched out.

"And Miss Crocker?" inquired Harold, with a beating heart.

The butler and the footman looked at each other in doubt; they did not seem to know where she was, but the footman thought she might be in the gardens. Should he go and look for her?

No, Harold said he would look for her himself. He left his horse to be taken round to the stables, and went through the house on to the lawn. He sought



for her vainly ; she was not in the flower-garden, nor in the shrubbery, nor in any of the hot-houses, nor in the high-walled kitchen-gardens. The men whom he interrogated had not seen her about anywhere.

At last he went down to the water-side, and there, at last, sitting motionless upon a clump of brown rock, he spied a slight girlish figure, with her back turned to him.

He came up softly behind her. She wore a dark dress, and her hat, with its blue feather, lay on the ground by her side—a bright patch of colour in the sombre landscape. The little waves rippled up close to her feet, the sea-gulls swirled about on white wings before her, the mountains looked faint and distant, and a red-funnelled steamer was slowly going out to sea.

Did Harold ever forget one single detail of that scene ? He came up softly, quite close to her, and spoke her name.

“ May ! My darling ! ” and then May turned and saw him, and in another minute her face, all wet with tears, was hidden upon his breast.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## A HIDDEN FOE

"ARE you coming up to the station to see the arch they have put up, Rosie?" asked David Haythorn, putting his head in at the cottage door.

"Not I!" answered Rosie, with a toss of her head. "I've got something else to do besides running after sight-seeing."

The girl sat at the table in the window busying herself over some scraps of lace and ribbon. Her father sat in the chimney-corner smoking his pipe; her mother was doing some ironing in the back kitchen.

"Rosie has grown a mighty fine lady since she has been to her aunt's at Wormington to learn dress-making; there ain't anything at Dorrington good enough for her now," said her father; but, although his words were a reproach, his eyes, as they rested on his lovely daughter, were full of pride.

Rosie reddened a little, and bent over her work.

David Haythorn leant idly in the doorway, and looked at her silently. It had made no difference to him, he thought, bitterly, that Mr. Dorrington was

going to marry a rich lady Rosie was as far removed from him, apparently, as ever. Ever since the news had come to the village, Rosie had been away, staying with her aunt in Wormington, who was a dressmaker, learning the business, she said, in order to go out to service as a lady's-maid.

Her father and mother approved of her intention, but to poor David Haythorn it was a dreadful resolve, and meant the death-blow of all his hopes. Rosie herself was very reticent about her future plans; she told no one why or wherefore she wished to go out to service, or whether indeed such was her serious determination.

She had come home for Christmas, for it was now December; Harold, too, had come home a few days ago; and the heiress was expected to arrive to-day to spend Christmas-time, too, with her future husband's family.

Report said the young people were to be married early in February, but Dorrington people generally, both in the Hall and in the village, thought it was a fitting and proper thing that Miss Crocker should first come and make acquaintance with them all. They were disposed to receive her favourably, for it was known that she was rich, and riches at the big house meant hopes of future good things for all the little houses. It was long since the owners of Dorrington had been able to do their part in the hospitalities and the charities which their position demanded. But now there was a good time coming everybody felt.

The village had put on holiday attire to do honour to Mr. Dorrington's chosen bride. The station-master and the porters had built up an arch of greenery with "Welcome" in scarlet flannel letters over it, and had laid a bit of red cloth down on the platform for her to alight upon. The school children were to stand on either side and scatter holly and laurel as she passed. It should have been flowers, by right, but what can one do in December? and the bell-ringers were to be in the tower and ring out a joyous peal to welcome her as she drove through the village, whilst a mixed crowd of men and women assembled outside the station at least an hour before the train was expected to arrive, to get a good sight of the young lady who was to be Dorrington's future queen. Every one was turning out stationwards to see her arrive, all but Rosie Wood, who did not seem to care to go. By-and-by her father and David went off together, and then Rosie got up and leisurely folded up her work. She fetched herself a thick grey shawl which she wrapped round her, putting it over her head and all, and crept out unobserved into the winter afternoon.

There were flags hanging out of some of the cottage windows, and people were hurrying along all in the same direction. Rosie stood for a moment and looked up at the church clock, and then turned away in the direction of the park-gates. She meant to see May Crocker, too; the woman who had taken Dorrington from her—for that was how she put it to herself—but

she meant to see her quietly and by herself; she did not intend to stand among the crowd that would shout "Hurrah!" as her carriage wheels passed by; that was not how she intended to see her enemy for the first time.

She sped swiftly along the lanes till she reached a spot about a hundred yards from the lodge-gates. Here, there were on either side of the road thick woods, now dank and wet with the winter mists, and rapidly darkening in the short winter afternoon. There was a gap in the hedge on one side, and a deep, damp, dead-leaf filled ditch. Rosie scrambled down its wet sides with the activity of a country-bred girl, crept through the gap, and crouched down behind the shelter of the hedge. Here she could see and not be seen. She drew her dark shawl more closely about her and waited.

Presently she heard the distant sounds of shouting and hurrahing—sounds which made her clench her hands together in impotent rage. They should have been for *her*, those shouts of joy and welcome! Then there was a long pause.

One of the school-children was to present a bouquet she knew, and the choir were to sing a song of welcome to the heiress. That was doubtless what was going on now.

Rosie got cramped and cold, but she never thought of moving. Only to while away the time she drew forth from her pocket a little dirty note—a note which, sleeping or waking, she always had kept by her ever

since she had received it, some five months ago. She knew it by heart, every word of it; it was not to refresh her memory that she read it now. It was very short, merely a few lines :—

“DEAR ROSIE,

“You will have heard, I daresay, that I am going to do what my father wishes, and marry Miss Crocker. I am sure your good sense will tell you that it is far the best thing that I could do, as you must see that a marriage with you would bring nothing but trouble to us both. So I hope you will forgive me for having wasted a few of your summer hours, and will find a good husband in your own rank of life, and will ask me to dance at your wedding.

“Yours sincerely,

“H. DORRINGTON.”

By the failing light Rosie read this note over again, and then put it back into her pocket.

“He shall never marry her—never!” she said aloud to herself, and her face was white and drawn with some concentrated feeling within, so that for a minute there was hardly a trace of beauty in it.

She had never answered that note—never by a single line—only all at once Dorrington had become hateful to her, and she had gone away suddenly to stay with her aunt the dressmaker in Wormington. She could do nothing; as long as Harold was away she was powerless; but now he had come back, and

his future bride was coming to stay at his father's house. Now, Rosie felt, her time had come; she had waited long enough for it—five long, weary months—but at last the time for action had come, and Rosie knew very well what she meant to do; she did not quite know how she was going to set about it, but she knew that it would be done. She was going to prevent May Crocker from marrying Harold: whether or no, by so doing, she would be able to marry him herself was another matter. What she wanted was, to prevent his being happy with the woman who stood in the place which should have been hers—hers by right, she said to herself, savagely. She should never fill it—never! Rosie thought she would kill her first.

Every day she read over that last note of Harold's; it was to keep her anger and her indignation alive against him.

Did Harold think to be rid of her so easily—so very easily as that? Was it such a simple matter to shake off a woman to whom he had spoken such words and written such letters as he had to her? He should see! She meant to sever him from May and her money; that was to be her revenge; and afterwards it did not seem such a hard matter to win him back herself.

Rosie had a profound faith in her own beauty and its great power over Harold. She did not honestly believe that there was another woman in England so

beautiful as she was—had not Harold often told her so?—and that being the case, was it not more than possible that, if he were to be hopelessly divided from May, he might return to the captivity which had once so much power to charm him?

Thinking over these things, Rosie crouched among the shadows of the thick woods and waited. By-and-by she heard the carriage-wheels coming noisily along the road; she bent closer into her sheltering corner and peered eagerly out. In another minute the Dorrington carriage came by.

There were four people inside; Lord Dorrington and his son, who sat with their backs to the horses, and Lady Dorrington and May opposite them. Harold was bending forward, and had taken hold of May's hand, and was apparently speaking of her to his mother. Nothing could be more lover-like than his attitude; he looked fondly and proudly at her. As to May, she was a little flushed, and there was a tremulous sweetness, half-pleasure, half-natural embarrassment about her, which made her very winning in the eyes of her future husband's parents.

Something of all this was patent even to Rosie in the instant in which the carriage dashed by her. She took in the picture at its every detail—Harold's absorbed and happy face, and May's look of mingled nervousness and content.

When they had passed her by—unconscious of the watcher who thus spied upon them—Rosie stood up



boldly in her hiding-place and looked after the departing carriage.

She shook her fist at it as it disappeared through the lodge gates into the park, and laughed aloud—a short, vindictive laugh—a laugh of bitter scorn and mockery, not good to hear.

“Enjoy yourself while you may, my fine lady!” she cried. “We shall see how long it will last; it will be my turn soon!” And then she drew her shawl round her, scrambled down the ditch out into the road, and hurried homewards.

When she reached her father’s cottage, she went in softly, and sat down again to finish trimming her new bonnet for Christmas Day, with a face so quiet and impassive that no one would have guessed that the peaceful serenity of her occupation had been for one moment disturbed.

Meanwhile May had reached the house, and had been welcomed in the hall by her future sisters-in-law.

Augusta and Louisa had been doubtful as to how they should receive the ironmaster’s daughter, and had hardly been enthusiastic in their reception of her; but Alice had greeted her warmly and gladly. Alice had been delighted at the turn events had taken. Even had May fallen short of the standard of feminine perfection which was fixed and immovable in the minds of the ladies of the Dorrington family, Alice would still have been ready and eager to make the best of her. “Anything,” she said to herself, “was

better than Rosie Wood :” and she could not be too thankful that her brother had escaped so quickly and so easily from the wiles of that maiden.

Alice did not believe now that Harold had ever gone so far as to promise to marry her. He had been, no doubt, foolish and imprudent, and there was a certain amount of pity in her mind for Rosie, as the victim of his folly ; but she exonerated her brother in her own mind from any further blame in the matter. Rosie, no doubt, saw how presumptuous her vanity had made her. She thought it wise of the girl to have gone away from home ; and she gave her credit for good sense and good feeling in endeavouring to get over Harold’s engagement in absence and occupation. So Alice locked up the whole story of the locket, and her own unpleasant interview with Rosie upon that subject, in the recesses of her own mind, and prepared to welcome May Crocker cordially, and to give her at once all the affection and all the sympathy which her brother’s future wife could have a right to expect from her.

## CHAPTER XIV

## A CHRISTMAS WALK

ALL went " merry as a marriage bell " that Christmas time at Dorrington Hall. Lord Dorrington was delighted at the perfect success of his schemes, and Lady Dorrington and her daughters were agreeably surprised to find the heiress so refined in mind and in manner, and so amiable and affectionate in disposition.

May won golden opinions from them all ; she made herself perfectly happy amongst them, and was spoilt and petted to her heart's content. As to Harold, he could not be proud and fond enough of her ; it seemed to him that no other woman on earth was equal to her, and the whole episode of his love affair with Rosie Wood became to him like a bad dream of the past, which he would not suffer himself to think about or even to remember. He walked or he rode with May daily ; he taught her billiards, and he made her read poetry to him. In short, they lived the life of a pair of ideal lovers, upon whom everybody smiled approvingly.

This blissful state of things lasted till Christmas Day, after which sundry unforeseen events took place.

Christmas morning rose upon the earth bright and sunshiny, with a crisp hoar frost sparkling like jewels over the face of the world. The ground was white and hard, and every branch and every twig on every tree and every bush was hung with thick, soft wreaths of diamonds, which glittered and flashed in the winter sunshine.

The little village church was full to overflowing. To begin with, there were the Christmas decorations to be seen and criticized, which always attracted a larger congregation than usual; and then there was the young lady staying at the Hall to be looked at.

When Mr. Lane, the vicar, stood up in his place and began, "When the wicked man"—every eye in the church was turned upon the Hall pew. May stood up, under the marble effigies of defunct generations of Dorringtons, between Harold and his father, looking small and slight among the tall, strong members of the Dorrington family. She was dimly conscious of being stared at by the whole congregation, and bent her face over her open Prayer Book.

Suddenly, Harold became aware of a beautiful face all too well known to him, which was now exactly opposite him. He looked up, and saw Rosie Wood looking fixedly at May. There was an expression of contempt upon Rosie's face as she looked at her rival. In what was this frail insignificant girl to be compared to herself!

The refinement and the grace which were May's

chief attractions were lost upon her; she only saw a face devoid of great beauty, features which were by no means regular, and eyes that, bent down now as they were upon her book, seemed to her to be deficient both in colouring and expression. Rosie felt almost a pity for Harold's chosen bride as she looked.

"She is not even pretty," she said to herself. "I shall do her no wrong; it is only for her money that he has taken her. How could any one look at us both—she and I—and not feel certain of that!"

But Harold was rendered intensely uncomfortable all church time by the vicinity of that lovely, scornful face. He could not but be conscious of its beauty, and he knew he had behaved badly to Rosie Wood.

Poor little Rosie! she was suffering, doubtless, from his defection. She had been very fond of him once, no doubt; and he—he had been fond of her in a way. It had been a foolish, unreasoning, boyish way certainly, but still Harold could not consider himself entirely free from blame in his dealings with her. He had made love to her for his own pleasure and pastime, and then had thrown her over somewhat heartlessly. Harold was very soft-hearted, and the sight of Rosie's lovely face, looking a little careworn and sad, he fancied, filled him with sudden remorse and compunction. He felt very tender and pitiful towards this poor girl, who had loved him once very much, and whose beautiful face he had so often kissed.

All the time of Mr. Lane's most excellent Christmas

sermon he sat racking his brains as to what he could do to prove his sorrow and his penitence to Rosie Wood. Should he give her a silk dress, or a five-pound note; would she consider either of these a sufficient compensation for her wounded feelings and her blighted love? If only she would marry herself he could give her a silver teapot, and a set of spoons and forks as a wedding present; that he felt would make everything straight between them; but unless she were going to be married he could hardly give her anything of that kind. No, it must either be a dress or a five pound note; Harold inclined to the latter—it would be less trouble and less likely, too, to excite observation. For Harold was not prepared to point out Rosie to May as the identical village maiden about whom he had once made confidences to her. By mutual consent that past episode of his life was never alluded to between them. May considered it rather discreditable to her lover, and did not care to question him about it, and Harold was only too glad to let the past sink into oblivion.

Harold was still debating the *pros* and *cons.* of the dress *versus* the five-pound note in his own mind, when Mr. Lane, remembering his parishioners' Christmas dinners, and possibly his own as well, brought his sermon to a timely close, and the congregation dispersed, a little crowd gathering round the porch to watch, with interest and sympathy, the departure of the ladies in the Dorrington carriage.

After luncheon, which was somewhat a prolonged meal, Harold and May prepared to go out for a walk together. Lord Dorrington had a message he wished Harold to take for him to the cottage of one of the keepers respecting some pheasants, but Harold demurred; the distance, he said, was too great for May to walk. But May overruled his objections. She would walk part of the way with him, she said, and then turn back when she was tired, and Alice should come out to meet her on her way home.

This arrangement suited everybody, and the lovers started together in the best of spirits. Just as they were going off, Lord Dorrington called them back across the garden to give them a note of written directions to the keeper; it would be safer, he told them, to have it written down, and then there could be no mistake about his orders.

"You had better give it to me," said May, taking it from his hand. "Harold will forget it to a certainty."

"Lovers' heads, eh! May?" laughed Lord Dorrington. "How can a young fellow expect to remember an old father's messages when he is walking with a pretty girl like you?"

May slipped the note into the pocket of her jacket, and the lovers went off through the shrubbery; Lord Dorrington looking after them for a few minutes with a complacent smile of self-congratulation on his handsome face.

The walk was a pretty one; a winding pathway

that led for a mile and a half through the thick woods which surrounded Dorrington Hall on every side.

The woods were half natural, half plantation, and the pathway had been cut through them years ago to make a drive for Harold's grandmother, who used in her old age to go about her dominions in a low donkey-chair. The walk was quite a private one, and yet it was so far removed from the house that it was not at all unusual for the villagers to stray into it on Sunday and holiday afternoons, and it had become a recognized fact that they might do so without being considered in the light of trespassers.

So it happened that Rosie Wood, wandering along disconsolately by herself that Christmas afternoon, suddenly heard the sound of voices behind her. No one was as yet in sight, but Rosie recognized Harold's voice. As quick as lightning she stepped off the path and hid herself behind some thick laurel bushes which bordered it.

No sooner had she done so than the lovers came in sight, so close to her that she could hear every word they were saying.

"Tell me why you fell in love with me, darling? What made you get fond of me?" Harold was asking, going through that sweet catechism of lovers which they are always fond of dwelling upon—that unfathomable riddle which they are never tired of propounding to each other.

The wintry sunshine came glinting through the



bare trees across the pathway, and flooded the two happy young faces as they came along.

Harold, secure in the solitude and seclusion of the walk, had wound his arm about her, and looked lovingly into her face, whilst May nestled confidently up against his shoulder. Rosie from her hiding-place saw and marked it all.

"What made you love me?" asked Harold once more.

"It was because *you* loved me," answered May, answering the happy look in his eyes. "Because I felt so *sure* that it was for myself and not for my money. You did not want my money, you know. I knew that from the first, and you fought so hard against your love for me, *because* of the money. But you could not help yourself, sir; though I do firmly believe that you would sooner I were penniless. That is why I love you, I think."

"Yes, that is quite true," answered Harold, in all sincerity.

"And you, Harold? What makes you fond of me? I am not pretty, you know."

"No, but you are *May*. That is all the definition of my feelings I can give you. You are just *May*, and there is no one like you."

And then the lovers passed out of sight, and Rosie could not hear any more.

She suddenly remembered that the pathway wound almost in a circle, and that by cutting swiftly across

the wood she could listen again to their talk. Rosie had already heard something that would be useful to her, and she was determined to hear more. She turned and fled swiftly through the thick undergrowth behind her.

Five minutes' struggle among the branches and the brambles, and she emerged again on to the pathway just at a point where a stile led out into the open road.

Here she waited a few minutes; presently she heard footsteps, but no voices. Harold, with bent head and hands thrust into his pockets, was coming along by himself. May had turned homewards. He looked downwards at his own feet, thinking over May's parting kiss—over her last words; thinking how sweet and loving had been her upturned glance—how bewitching her smile as she had returned his caress—little thinking as he dwelt on it, how soon the clouds were to gather upon the bright horizon of his love, how long it might be again before that perfect confidence, free alike from doubt and from suspicion, would exist between himself and her. Already, all unknown to either of them, the day-dream of their happy love was over, and a serpent had crept into their Eden.

Harold, looking suddenly up as he neared the stile, beheld Rosie Wood standing before him.

At precisely the same moment May, trudging away in the contrary direction back towards Dorrington,

thrust her hands into her jacket pockets, and discovered in one of them Lord Dorrington's note to the keeper.

With a laugh over her own forgetfulness, May turned quickly round again, in order to catch up Harold, and to give it to him. She came along rapidly and swiftly, and came suddenly upon—this!

Harold standing by the stile with his back towards her, and in front of him a woman—a woman who had placed a hand upon each of his shoulders; whose flushed, beautiful face was close up to his; whose dark eyes, streaming with tears, were looking into his; whilst a torrent of wild, passionate words poured rapidly from her lovely, trembling lips.

## CHAPTER XV.

## SUSPICION

MAY stood rooted to the spot. Harold's back was turned to her so that he could not see her, and if Rosie was conscious of her presence, she made no sign of being so. It was in fact almost impossible that Rosie should not have seen her, but the sudden appearance of her rival upon the scene was not likely to disconcert Miss Wood; on the contrary, it gave an additional incentive to her words.

“Do you think you can get rid of me so easily, Harold?” were the first words which, in her horror and her amazement, May was conscious of understanding. “Do you think that I can let you go so lightly, after all the years we have loved each other? for you *have* loved me, Harold, you know that you have; and but for this woman and her money you would own that you love me still. Hush! don't speak or deny it. I know that I am poor, and low-born, and friendless, that I am no match for Lord Dorrington's son; but does that make me any the less a woman, with a woman's heart? Is my love to go for nothing?—my heart, that you took such pains to win,

to be flung away like a dead flower? If you were brave enough to be true to yourself, Harold, you would let her go, and come back to me."

"Rosie, do be reasonable," pleaded Harold; and he was touched in spite of himself by her words. "Look here; let us drop this subject for ever. You know I could not have married you; it would never have done. Here, I have a little present for you; take this, like a good girl, and don't make any more fuss about things;" and somewhat awkwardly Harold produced the five-pound note out of his waistcoat pocket.

The scorn and the contempt in Rosie Wood's face was something wonderful to behold. She pushed Harold roughly from her, and the note fluttered like a dead leaf to the ground between them.

"How dare you offer me money!" she cried, angrily—but it is by no means certain that her indignation would have been so overpowering or so freely expressed but for the figure of that other woman who stood pale and motionless within earshot—"how dare you offer me money! Is it your money that I want? Do you imagine that love can be bought and sold? That may be your experience, Mr. Dorrington. You, who can smother the affection of years by selling yourself to a rich bride, to *you* money may mean everything; but do not insult me by supposing that you can tempt *me* in such a manner!"

Then May could bear it no longer; she had listened

in her first bewilderment, not meaning to listen, but now it struck her suddenly that she was hearing things not meant for her to hear, that she was playing spy upon a scene which she ought to be the last person on earth to witness. She turned and fled swiftly and noiselessly along the woodland path, flying breathlessly and blindly with an instinctive longing to get away, to be free, to be alone; to be out of hearing of those scornful, passionate words, out of sight of that flushed, beautiful face.

Back along the pathway where so lately she had sauntered happily and proudly with her lover, among the laurels, and the yews, and bare winter trees that arched themselves overhead, and under the same sunshine which still flickered through them upon her bent head and white-stricken face—back she came, flying as one who flies for life,

There was a broken moss-grown bench by the wayside; here, at length, she flung herself down and covered her face shudderingly in her hands. She did not cry out; she did not shed a single tear—she only felt that she must choke—that something had happened to her that had altered her whole life—that had destroyed the whole fabric of her existence. Was it all true what she had heard—what that woman had said?

She sat there a long time—till the sunshine faded, and the air grew chilly, and the winter afternoon began to close in; and by degrees she grew calmer,

and could think over what she had seen and heard quietly and dispassionately

What did it all mean? May asked herself.

The whole of Harold's story to her of his village intrigue came back clearly and distinctly to her memory. This, of course, was the girl—of that there could be no doubt. And what a lovely girl she was! May could acknowledge that to herself with a sharp pang of miserable jealousy at the thought; she was more than lovely—she was absolutely beautiful. May had never in her whole life seen such a perfect face; and there had been nothing coarse or vulgar about either her appearance or her language. There had been even a certain rough eloquence—a natural dignity and power in those passionate reproaches which she had overheard. It seemed to May that the girl had spoken from her very heart; that she loved Harold, and that Harold had basely and treacherously deserted her, because, as she had said, she was poor and friendless. But, if this was true, what was the part played in this tragedy by Harold?—Was it not utterly shameful and despicable? Ah! she would—could not believe it!

Then May started up, horror-struck at her own suspicions. She tried not to judge or condemn him; she would not believe such base things of the man she had learnt to love so well! She had believed him to be so good, so true, so worthy of her love; and was her faith in him to vanish thus at the first trial?

She walked homeward slowly and lingeringly, deep in thought.

After all, she said to herself, he had said but little ; it was possible that that poor girl loved him, but that, as he had once told her himself, he had cared a little for her. There was nothing in what she had heard to make her think that it was true that he had loved this village girl ; although he might—nay, she feared, he undoubtedly had behaved badly and cruelly to her.

May wished that Harold had been more open with her ; it would have been, she thought, more manly, more truthful on his part, and it would have spared her this horrible shock. She was, she felt, no foolish, sentimental girl, to have made a fuss over any confessions of past-love episodes ; she would have known how to treat him generously. She had not supposed that she could be the first and the only love to a man of seven-and-twenty ; it was not likely that she should be. Girls who expect such things are simply ignorant and silly, and deserve no pity in their folly. But May, who prided herself upon her common-sense, and upon her sober, rational way of regarding life, felt that it was hard that Harold should not have treated her with more confidence.

By the time she had reached the house, she had reasoned herself into the belief that this was the only grievance she had against Harold. As to believing that he had thrown over the girl he loved for the



sake of her own money, May put away the thought from her mind, forcibly and with horror ; she simply would not allow herself to think of such a thing. It was—it *must* be impossible !

When she met Alice just starting out across the lawn to meet her, she greeted her smilingly and affectionately ; she was determined to be happy, to forget that dreadful scene of which she had been an unwilling witness, to bury what she had seen and heard in her own heart. and to say no word of it to any one.

She was a brave, true-hearted woman was May Crocker, and she did her very best to be generous, and to banish all small-mindedness and all miserable and petty jealousies from her mind ; but for all that a serpent had crept into the fair garden of her heart which it was beyond her power to exterminate or to expel from it, and that serpent's name was—Suspicion.

All at once everything was tinged with the baleful influence of this monster. When Harold's mother and sisters pressed round her, hoping that she was not tired after her walk, offering her tea, one taking her jacket, another her hat, a third pushing forward an arm-chair for her to repose in, May said to herself : “ If I were a poor girl without a shilling of my own, would they overwhelm me with all this kindness ? ”

When she went up into her own room, she caught sight of her face in the looking-glass, and stood suddenly riveted in front of it, regarding her image

therein with a fixity and an attention which was not usual to her.

“There is nothing,” she said slowly, speaking aloud to herself—“*nothing* that a man could admire in my face ; no one could possibly call me even pretty ; and *she*, that other woman, is absolutely beautiful. Would any man choose me in preference to her, were I not rich and she poor ?”

In the evening May was silent and abstracted, and it seemed to her already diseased imagination that Harold, too, was unusually grave and thoughtful.

The Christmas dinner was not a very lively repast ; indeed, but for the presence of two small schoolboys, nephews of Lady Dorrington’s, who were spending their holidays at the Hall, the meal would have been actually depressing. Thanks, however, to the presence of these young gentlemen, the proper amount of excitement over the appearance of the turkey and the flaming plum-pudding was duly aroused around the table, and the necessity for restricting their unbounded capacity for gorging themselves, to three helpings of pudding and two mince-pies apiece, was sufficient to occupy the attention and conversation of the ladies, and served to cover any little embarrassment which might otherwise have been apparent.

When dessert was placed on the table the servants withdrew, which was always the signal for a Christmas ceremony which Lord Dorrington could never be induced to forego. This was the drinking of healths.

A bottle of a particular tap of old Madeira was pushed round, and everybody filled up their glasses in silence. Then Lord Dorrington stood up and cleared his throat. At this point of the proceedings Lady Dorrington invariably began to cry—nobody exactly knew why.

“I drink a happy Christmas to all absent friends and relations,” said his lordship, solemnly, lifting his glass. At which Augusta and Louisa remembered the lovers of past years and sighed sentimentally, and poor Alice thought of Captain Denham and grew pale and fidgeted with her bracelets. Then Lord Dorrington, looking complacently round the table, added :

“And this year I couple with the toast the names of two who are present with us—Harold and our dear May, and may they live to see many Christmas days, and lead a happy and a good life under this roof when we their parents are dead and gone.”

Everybody drank the toast smilingly, looking towards May as they did so, and Harold nodded affectionately across the table at her. But May’s heart sank heavy as lead and cold as a stone within her, and she could not utter one single word in acknowledgment of their kindly greetings.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## GUESTS AT DORRINGTON

THE following day the privacy of the family party was broken into by the arrival of Sir John and Lady Harrison from Scotland, and also of two young men, officers from Wormington, who were invited to spend the remainder of the week at Dorrington.

Lord Dorrington had arranged to shoot his covers in honour of these guests, and Harold, of course, had to help to entertain them. May was thus left more to the society of the ladies, and was horrified to find how great was her relief to be freed from her lover's constant attention and society. It was not that she loved him any the less, but that his every word and action was now so fraught with painful suspicion, that any exhibition of tenderness or devotion towards herself seemed to be absolutely unbearable to her. She was filled with anger and indignation against herself for these unworthy thoughts, and yet she was absolutely powerless to quell them.

As to my hero, his own feelings were so complex and confused at this period that it is difficult to

explain his state of mind. I have written of Harold Dorrington to very little purpose if I have failed to demonstrate that he was one of those winning and lovable persons against whom, nevertheless, together with Reuben of old, the verdict of "unstable as water" has gone forth.

Harold was affectionate and amiable, but he was as easily to be swayed by the different influences about him as the long willow osiers by the river-side are bent by every puff of summer wind. Anybody could influence him for good ; but then, again, any one could also affect him for evil.

In May's strong little hands he became endued with a vigour of character which he did not naturally possess. Her goodness, her downrightness, her perfect sincerity and uprightness of principle and character, impressed him with a strong and deep admiration for her. There was such strength and at the same time such womanliness about her, that Harold became a better and a braver man from contact with her ; and he was, moreover, sincerely in love with her.

Nevertheless, when Rosie Wood had met him in the shrubby walk, and had appealed, as she knew well how to do, to his weakest points—when she had flattered his vanity and traded slightly upon his fears—when she had put forth all her arts and her charms to captivate his senses, and all the strength of her will to bend his weak and wavering resolution to her

own—Harold had felt himself to be worsted in the encounter with his old love.

The interview had lasted long—much longer than that portion of it which May had witnessed—and Harold felt very uncomfortable indeed after it was over. He was, to confess the truth, somewhat afraid of Rosie Wood. Her impetuosity and her passionate fervour bore down his own weak and wavering will before it with irresistible might. To use her own expression, she knew how to twist Harold round her finger. She could make him do and say almost anything she wished.

Harold was not very sure what he had not done and said on that particular Christmas afternoon. He was almost afraid that, what with his terror of her making a public scandal, his self-reproaches at his own conduct towards her as set forth by her own scorching words, and his too evident admiration of beauty in distress, he had said things which he had not intended to say, and pledged himself to do and not to do sundry things which, upon calm reflection, filled him with dismay.

He was not quite sure that—just to quiet her, and to stop the torrent of her angry words—he had not almost owned to having wooed May for her money alone. It was not true; he loved May dearly. But what was a man to do with a beautiful virago hanging about his neck, and assuring him that such and such things were so! He did not like to tell Rosie Wood

that he had ceased to love her—his sense of gentleman-like courtesy made it impossible for him to do so; yet how else was he to account for having suddenly forsaken her for another? If it satisfied her to believe that, loving herself still, he had engaged himself to May for her fortune, perhaps it would be better to let her believe it.

Nevertheless, Harold felt uncomfortably certain that he had been foolish to temporize with Rosie. He knew that, had he had moral courage enough, it would have been wiser to have told her roughly and bluntly what was the truth. He divined that he had only put himself more than ever in her power; and he felt perfectly convinced that he had by no means heard the last of Rosie Wood. \*

With this weight upon him—a weight which he had not the courage to bring boldly to May, and to lay before her, trusting in the generosity of a nature so free from petty feminine littlenesses that he did not as yet appreciate its beauty—with this secret preying upon him, which it seemed to him that he must, at all hazards, hide from her eyes, Harold felt very glad of the arrival of the two officers from Wormington.

The advent of these gentlemen caused a certain amount of agitation in the breasts of the two elder Miss Dorringtons. Hope was not, apparently, entirely extinct within them.

Augusta marked the importance of the event by coming down to dinner with two long ringlets down

her back, and with her hair frizzled and curled up on her forehead in an unaccustomed manner.

"She always does that," said Louisa, in an audible tone, aside to May, "whenever there are any men about;" for Louisa, whose hair was her weak point, was always filled with envy and jealousy at her elder sister's more abundant locks.

It is doubtful whether Messrs. Graham and Bevan, of Her Majesty's 213th Foot, were at all sensible of the compliment to themselves implied by this display of the hairdresser's art.

Neither of these gentlemen had as yet attained the dignity of a captaincy—for promotion was slow in the 213th; they subsisted painfully and laboriously upon their lieutenant's pay, and had no thoughts of matrimony whatever, and certainly no thoughts of it in connection with the Miss Dorringtons. The soul of Graham, indeed, the elder of the two, was set upon his host's old Madeira. He had been at Dorrington before, and had retained a lively recollection of it.

"It's to be hoped the old boy will bring out that Madeira," he had said to his companion, as they set forth together from Wormington. "I assure you I never tasted anything to equal it—beats the colonel's into fits; and if I were you I'd stick to the sherry during dinner—it's very fair, indeed; the champagne is doubtful—never can be quite sure of it—sometimes it is pretty good, but sometimes it is filthy; a lot of



sweetstuff got to please the women, I suppose. You stick to the sherry, Tom."

"What are the women like?" inquired Mr Bevan, who was fond of dancing, and considered himself to be, in virtue of a fine pair of dark brown eyes and a heavy moustache, somewhat irresistible with the fair sex.

"The women? Oh! very like all other women!" answered his friend, contemptuously; for Mr. Graham liked it to be understood that he was absolutely satiated with the society of women, and had found it to be all vexation and vanity. "The women are well enough, I daresay, for those who care about that sort of thing. Lady Dorrington is pleasant and harmless; the girls are harmless without being pleasant. They talk about sketching and lawn tennis, and they simper and sing duets out of tune. I never bother myself about women in a house, unless there are any young married ones; it isn't worth a man's while to talk to anything else in petticoats. Girls are well enough for boys;" with a prolonged yawn, which made Tom Bevan feel himself condemned as very much a boy indeed; "but men don't care about your blushing innocence nowadays; that's all gone out of fashion. You stick to the sherry, Tom, and let the women alone. The shooting is good, and young Dorrington is a very good fellow—was in the 35th Lancers, you know, but went a mucker."

"Oh! yes, I remember," nodded Bevan, to whom the latter enigmatical expression meant the whole story

of Harold's past career of extravagance and dissipation, wound up by his necessary retirement from the Lancer regiment.

This was not very hopeful material for Augusta and Louisa to work upon ; nevertheless, all unconscious of Mr. Graham's unflattering opinion of them, they set to work bravely to make the most of the means at their disposal. Alice, being the youngest, dined in the old school-room by herself, so as not to make an odd number at table, and did not appear till after dinner. So her sisters had it all their own way. Mr. Bevan could never resist the temptation of going through the process known as "making eyes." He said to himself that it was all very well for Graham, who had fishy blue orbs and no eyelashes to speak of, to talk disparagingly of the fair sex ; but when a man has been gifted with swimming brown optics, calculated to express unutterable things, it is a downright sin not to make use of them.

During the early part of dinner he fixed these ornamental eyes languishingly upon May, but finding that she was utterly unconscious of them, and gathering moreover from something in the conversation that she was engaged to Mr. Dorrington, he transferred their glances to Louisa, who sat next to him, and who fully appreciated the attention.

Dinner being over, however, Alice appeared upon the scene when the gentlemen returned to the drawing-room. Our impressionable and inconstant lieutenant

instantly became convinced that, as he said to himself in that peculiar vernacular which has been adopted by the Young England of the present day, this youngest sister was, "by long chalks," the best of the three. He instantly attached himself to her, and brought the battery of his brown eyes to bear upon her. But Alice, who somehow did not care much about men since the days of Lionel Denham, was not desirous of retaining Mr. Bevan in a *tête-à-tête* on the sofa, where he had flung himself by her side ; she called to May and to Louisa to come and join them.

Augusta, having settled in her own mind that Mr. Bevan, in spite of his eyes, was singularly empty-headed and uninteresting, and that his friend had "very much more in him," had attached herself to Mr. Graham and her brother as they stood discussing the prospects of to-morrow's shooting by the fireplace. The four elders were playing a rubber of whist in the further room.

Then somehow these young people between them, and no one knew exactly how the idea was originated, settled that they would have a Christmas party of some sort at the beginning of the following week ; and by degrees the entertainment to be given resolved itself into "Tableaux Vivants," to be followed by a dance. Louisa was anxious to have theatricals, but there was no time to get them up. *Tableaux*, albeit somewhat out of date and old-fashioned, are easier managed.

May flung herself into the scheme with animation ; it gave her something to think about besides her own perplexities ; and Alice, in spite of her love troubles, was not sorry for a little break in the monotony of home-life, and promised to extract the paternal consent.

As to Tom Bevan, he had instant visions of himself in a variety of interesting attitudes, for he was very vain of his handsome face was this young man. He pictured himself as Edward the Black Prince, in full armour ; as Chastelard, in maroon velvet and blue silk trunk-hose, with a guitar slung across his breast at the feet of Alice as Mary Queen of Scots ; as Lovelace, in black velvet knee-breeches, powder and ruffles ; in each and all of these characters it seemed to him that he would be fascinating ; he could not settle in which his handsome face and figure would be seen to best advantage. It was a pity indeed that the decors of society would not admit of the Apollo of Belvedere, or Ajax defying the lightning ; but, seeing that he must appear duly clothed and in his right mind, there was no doubt that a velvet doublet, slashed with satin, would best suit his face, whilst chain-armour would be eminently becoming to his figure ; but then, again, how splendidly powder would set off his eyes !

Mr. Bevan became absolutely absorbed by these conflicting claims, whilst the young ladies chattered eagerly amongst themselves. It would be so easy for them to settle everything—dresses, characters, and

subjects to be represented—whilst the gentlemen were out shooting. No entertainment could be easier to get up; an hour's rehearsal every day after dinner would be all that would be necessary. The old house contained a long disused ball-room, and an ante-room opening out of it, that with very little help from the village carpenter could be easily transformed into a stage. A few more men would be wanted, and Tom Bevan eagerly promised any number of "our fellows,"—*i.e.*, the gallant 213th. "It isn't like acting," he said.

"No," answered May, with unconscious sarcasm, "any donkey can dress up and stand still."

"Yes, but you want a good-looking fellow to set the part off to advantage," answered the warrior, with a smile of conscious belief in his own charms.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## “ JESSICA ”

THE preparations for the *tableaux vivants* went on apace. Lord Dorrington, anxious to please May, had given his consent instantly on learning that the proposed entertainment would amuse her. Lady Dorrington had ordered a supper, and had written above a hundred invitations, which had been responded to with alacrity.

It was long since so large a party had been in prospect at Dorrington Hall. But as his lordship justly said, it is not every day that one's eldest son is engaged to an heiress to somewhere about ten thousand a year, and it was as well to celebrate the happy event by some special mark of rejoicing, especially when the young lady was so charming and so thoroughly approved of by her future husband's family as was May Crocker.

So the young ladies set to work to fix upon the scenes, and to prepare the costumes and the stage of the theatre, with much animation and excitement; the men, reinforced by two neighbouring squires, helping them in the evenings.

The old ball-room presented rather a singular scene that week during the after-dinner hours. There was the village carpenter at one end nailing, fixing, and measuring. Harold, who was stage-manager, superintending everything, and lending a helping hand to his operations. The length of the room, which was dimly lighted by candles of all sizes and lengths disposed about on chairs and odd tables, and even on the boarded floor, was usually littered with scraps of silk and satin, yards of gold braid, and piles of fantastic garments. A sort of dress rehearsal would be going on at the further end of the room, whilst every now and then some one or other of the company would enter suddenly, attired as a warrior in armour, or a Greek maiden, or a clown in cap and bells, to be greeted by the rest with shouts of admiration or of laughter.

The ladies'-maids of the establishment, who were the only privileged persons admitted to the proceedings, bustled about from one group to the other with pins, and needles, and cotton, rendering their assistance impartially to all those whose toilettes were in trouble.

There had been no difficulty about the dresses. Lady Dorrington had placed her grandmother's brocades and all the old family lace and jewels at their disposal. There were full suits of armour, and ancient weapons of every kind lining the sides of the entrance-

hall, and May supplemented every requirement by telegraphing to Nathan's for everything that was wanted, and paying for it recklessly out of her own ample supply of pocket-money.

In this way, amidst a great deal of chattering and fun, accompanied by an under-current of pretty brisk flirtation, the preparations were carried on, and the eventful day drew near.

There were to be six *tableaux*, all from Shakespearean subjects. There was, of course, to be the hackneyed balcony scene from "Romeo and Juliet;" two less well-known incidents from "Henry the Fifth" and "Richard the Second," selected in order to show off the armour; a scene from "As You Like It;" another from "The Merchant of Venice;" the whole to be wound up with Hamlet and Ophelia, to be enacted by Harold and May.

Everybody fitted into the different characters readily and naturally, excepting in one instance. "The Merchant of Venice" presented an unexpected difficulty, as no one of the ladies could be persuaded to undertake the part of Jessica. Augusta's heart was set upon this particular *tableau*, as she was determined upon playing Portia herself, in a black cap and gown, which she considered especially becoming to her fair skin and tall figure, but the Jessica could not be found.

May absolutely refused the part, and so did Louisa and Alice. Jessica must not only be lovely, she must



of necessity also be dark—a fair Jessica would be ridiculous. The clergyman's daughters were thought of; they were dark, certainly, but they were anything but lovely; and Harold flatly refused to play Lorenzo to either of them.

In consequence of this difficulty, the scene from "The Merchant of Venice" hung fire; the other five were by the end of the week in a fairly forward condition, but nothing further had been done about the unlucky and unfindable Jessica. The others were of opinion that the *tableau* should be changed in the programme for some other subject, but Augusta had set her heart upon appearing as Portia, and refused to give it up.

"You leave it to me," she said; "I will find a Jessica somewhere. If I get the dress all ready, it will be no trouble to fit it on at the last. This is my own particular *tableau*, and I will pledge myself that it shall come off."

So, as she chose to undertake the responsibility of it, "The Merchant of Venice" was given over to Augusta.

On the very morning of the performance Augusta came into the breakfast-room overflowing with satisfaction.

"I have got her!" she exclaimed, triumphantly.

"Who?"

"My Jessica! I found her last night, and have tried her dress on and settled it all!"

“Who is she?” was asked eagerly on all sides. But Augusta chose to be mysterious.

“Ah!” she said, “that is my secret! I don’t mean to tell a soul! You will see her when the time comes; she is perfectly beautiful, and she is dark enough for the part. I am not going to tell you a word more! You will see her to-night when I produce her!”

“But are we to have no rehearsal with this lovely and unknown being?” inquired Mr. Beran.

“No, it is unnecessary. I have shown her the illustration in the ‘Shakespeare’ which we have determined to carry out, and placed her in the proper attitude; she only sits down, you know. She quite understands, and there is nothing further to be done till she bursts upon your ravished gaze.”

“But, my dear, how came you to find her last night? You never went out?” inquired Lady Dorrington from behind the urn, painfully endeavouring to recollect who took sugar and who didn’t—a subject which always became involved in confusion in her mind every succeeding morning.

“Mamma, when I said that *I* found her, I deviated slightly from the paths of strict veracity. Give me some butter, please Mr. Graham; thanks. I did not actually find her myself; she was brought to my bedroom door last night by a beneficent being who for the time assumed the familiar and homely features of the worthy and estimable Langley.” Now Langley was Lady Dorrington’s maid.

No one could extract a word more out of Augusta about her mysterious Jessica, but there arose simultaneously in the minds of three of her hearers an uncomfortable suspicion to which each, not knowing of the thoughts of the other, did not venture to give utterance. The name of the lady's-maid put it into the thoughts of Harold, of Alice, and of May, that Augustas beautiful unknown had been found in the village, and, if so, was there any other girl in the whole parish of Dorrington so well suited to take the part of Jessica as Rosie Wood?

This unpleasant surmise was enough to fill the minds of those who suspected it with disquiet, but neither Harold nor May cared to allude to so dangerous a topic.

Alice, indeed, took her elder sister apart after breakfast and endeavoured to question her:

"Gussie, you can never intend to bring in a girl from the village to our acting!" she remonstrated.

"My dear child, who ever said a word about any girl from the village?"

"I assure you, you will give great offence by doing such a thing; it would cause endless jealousies and heartburnings among the people."

"My dear Alice, you are begging the question."

"But, Gussie," persisted. Alice, "I feel convinced that it is a village girl, and, if so, it must be Rosie Wood; it would be a most improper thing to do, and for Heaven's sake have nothing to do with that girl!

I am convinced that something dreadful will happen if you do,” she added, earnestly.

Augusta opened her blue eyes in amazement.

“Really, Alice, you seem in the most extraordinary state of mind! Have I ever mentioned Rosie Wood’s name? and surely I must be a better judge than my younger sister as to what would or would not be proper to do. You may be quite sure that I shall do nothing that papa would disapprove of,” she said, turning away with injured dignity, and Alice did not venture to say anything further, although her doubts and apprehensions were increased rather than diminished by what her sister had said.

The eventful evening came. The order of proceedings was to be as follows: the company were expected to arrive at nine o’clock, and seats were arranged in rows in the ball-room; the stage was curtained off at the end of it.

The *tableaux* were then to take place, with an interval of ten minutes, to be filled up with appropriate music between each. They were expected to occupy about an hour, after which everybody was to move into the adjoining picture-gallery, where tea and ices would be served. Then the seats were to be rapidly cleared away, and the actors in the *tableaux* to resume their ordinary garments. The military band of the 213th, who had volunteered their services, were to occupy the raised stage, and dancing was then to be begun at once and with as little delay as possible.

Everything came off perfectly as had been arranged. The guests arrived in good time and in goodly numbers, and all took their seats rapidly and without confusion, and the curtain rose upon Romeo and Juliet—Mr. Bevan being Romeo, and May Juliet, whilst Louisa took the part of the Nurse.

The other three *tableaux* followed in regular succession, and were much applauded and duly encored. The scene from "Hamlet" was to be the last of all, the one from "The Merchant of Venice" the last but one. There was apparently some slight hitch in the proceedings before this particular *tableau*, for there was a longer interval between the scenes. The lady who had volunteered to sing appropriate Shakesperean songs finished "Tell me where is fancy bred," and began "Where the bee sucks," which was very pretty certainly, but had not much to do with "The Merchant of Venice," as everybody laughingly agreed.

However, the audience waited with imperturbable good temper until at last the curtain rose—rose upon Portia, in her doctor's cap and gown, attended by Louisa as Nerissa; upon Messrs. Graham and Bevan as the Duke and Bassanio; upon one of the friendly squires as Shylock; upon Harold, as good-looking a Lorenzo as any one would wish to find; and upon the loveliest Jessica that it could have entered into the heart of Shakespeare himself to conceive—but a Jessica whose name and whose face were utterly unknown to everybody present.

Three stars on the printed programme represented her, and the question “Who is she?” went eagerly round, but no one could answer it.

The curtain fell amidst murmurs of wondering admiration, and in spite of the usual cries of *encore*, declined obstinately to go up again. One vision of that lovely Jessica was evidently all that was to be vouchsafed to the audience. Somebody set the music going, and the clamours for an *encore* became subservient to good manners, and subsided.

Then a still longer interval elapsed. There was a slight confusion by the door, and Lady Dorrington was observed to slip hurriedly out. The guests began to talk and to wonder, first in subdued tones, but at last loudly and anxiously. Then, amid a general hush, Lord Dorrington stepped forward in front of the foot-lights, looking pale and anxious, and announced to his guests that an unforeseen accident had prevented the sixth *tableau* from taking place, and that if they would all kindly adjourn to the picture-gallery, the ball-room would be immediately cleared for dancing.

“For Heaven’s sake tell me what has happened?” said Lady Dorrington, in a frightened whisper, to her youngest daughter.

“May cannot be found—she is not in the house!” was the trembling answer.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## IT IS YOUR MONEY

MAY had been dressing in her own room for the part of Ophelia. Having nothing to do with the scene from "The Merchant of Venice," she had not been into the "green-room," where the different characters for each *tableau* assembled after they were dressed. Some unacknowledged instinct possibly had kept her out of it. She had not therefore been a witness of the slight confusion which the sudden appearance of Rosie, all ready dressed as Jessica, and following timidly in the wake of Augusta, had created among the actors, Alice had been openly indignant with her sister, and with the girl herself for daring to appear in Lord Dorrington's house, where she had already done so much mischief. Harold had been disturbed beyond measure; he was thankful for May's absence, and yet fearful, too, lest he should offend Rosie, and call down her vengeance in some still more unpleasant manner upon himself. The other men, not knowing of the "wheels within wheels," were simply struck dumb with Jessica's beauty; and though surprised at Harold's and Alice's evident discomposure, set it down to their natural

annoyance at what was certainly a slight breach of good taste on Augusta's part in introducing a village girl into the performance.

It was too late to do anything. Harold stipulated that there should be no *encore* ; and the *tableau*, as we have seen, took place.

All this time May was dressing in her own room, unconscious of what was taking place below. Her maid was with her for some time, but when she was nearly ready she sent her away to see if she could be of any use to Alice.

She stood up before her glass and fastened some heavy gold bracelets round her arms. Her dress of white cashmere, embroidered with gold braid, and made like a tunic, was caught up on one side over a crimson velvet train ; two gold fillets bound her hair over her brows, which streamed down over them, long and bright, to her waist at the back ; whilst an antique gold girdle showed off to advantage the graceful outlines of her supple figure.

May looked her very best, and at her best May was almost a pretty girl. As she surveyed her image in the mirror she felt glad that it was so, not for her own sake, but for her lover's.

"There is, perhaps, something about me," she said to herself, with a little blush over her own thoughts—"something about me that a man might like ;" and to May, whose bugbear it was to be sought for her money, this thought was very sweet.



There came a knock at the door behind her.

"Come in, Ellis, and come and clasp this bracelet for me," said May, without looking up.

"I wanted to say something to you, Miss," said a voice behind her—a voice that was certainly not her maid's.

May turned round startled.

There stood before her a girl so radiantly beautiful that at the first moment she failed to recognize her. It was the Jessica of "The Merchant of Venice"—a Jessica in crimson satin and old lace, with diamonds glittering upon the ivory white of her bosom—Jessica standing there, with her hands simply clasped before her, her head a little bent, with a brilliant colour glowing richly in her smooth cheeks and upon her parted lips arched like a Cupid's bow, and with dark eyes that shone and gleamed under their long lashes, fixed earnestly upon May's bewildered face. As she looked at her May remembered her; it was the girl she had seen in the shrubbery on Christmas Day—the girl who had stood clinging to Harold's neck.

"*You!*" she said, falteringly, not recollecting that this girl would not know that she had seen her before.

"Miss Crocker," said Rosie, in a low, sad voice, "I am a very unhappy girl."

"Why do you come here?" cried May, impetuously and passionately "I don't want to see you. How dare you come into my room!"

"Don't be angry with me," said Rosie, quietly;

"if I could help it I would not come, but I have a duty to do—it is something on my conscience which I cannot keep to myself any longer; that is why I am here to-night in this dress"—touching the rich folds of her gown—"this dress in which I am out of my place—out of my station in life. It was that I might get to speak to you, Miss, that I let Miss Dorrington dress me up like this and show me to all her fine friends. I did not know how else to get near you, and there is a thing I must say to you."

"You can have nothing to say to me—nothing."

"Ah!" she cried, wringing her hands together, whilst it seemed to May that the tears stood thickly in those dark, lovely eyes—for it did not need Jessica's crimson satin robe to turn Rosie Wood into an actress of the highest order—"ah! how I wish I need not say it; if it were only for myself I would hold my tongue and go away, and no one should ever see or hear of me again. What would it matter what became of a poor girl like me if I have lost *him*? Why need I care for anything else on earth? I would go away and be never heard of again—up to London—I could earn my living there in some way. I am good-looking enough, I suppose?" she added, with bitter scorn.

May shuddered.

"Don't," she said, earnestly—"don't speak in such a dreadful reckless way; it is wicked to talk like that."

"What does it matter? I have lost all I once

cared for, but if it was to make *him* happy, do you think I should care about myself? But, Miss Crocker, it is for you that I fret; I cannot bear that he should deceive and betray your happiness too."

"Be silent," cried May, angrily stamping her foot and flushing hotly. "How dare you speak of him—of Mr. Dorrington—in such a manner? If you think he has behaved badly to you, if he has made you unhappy, I am very sorry for you, but you have no right to come here to me to call him names; *that* is not the way to make me sympathize with you."

"I do not want your sympathy, Miss," said Rosie, with a certain quiet dignity. "I do not want to speak of myself and my troubles at all; whatever they are I can bear them very well by myself. It is for your sake that I am here, because I am sorry for you, because you believe that Mr. Dorrington loves you and has sought you for yourself, and because I know that his love is false, and that what he wants is your money and not yourself."

*For her money!* Ah! fatal words, that struck into her heart like ice, with a fearful, horrible conviction of their truth. She caught at the table by which she stood, and trembled violently.

"You have no proof—it is only your fancy," she faltered.

Rosie Wood bent down over her rich dress, and from among the folds of satin and of Spanish point

drew forth slowly a small white object; it was a letter.

"I think I have a proof," she answered, quietly; and, for all her cleverness, she could not help a gleam of sudden malice from stealing, swift and subtle, like a serpent's glance, out of her half-veiled eyes, as she held out the letter to her rival.

Even then May's better angel whispered to her to refuse it, to turn away from the bitter fruit of the tree of knowledge which was thus held out to her, to say, boldly and bravely: "Keep your proof; I will have none of it," and to go to Harold himself for an explanation. But she wavered.

Rosie stood before her, still holding out the note. May glanced at it, and recognized the handwriting. It was Harold's. In that glance the tempter prevailed, and she wrecked her own happiness. She took the letter from Rosie's outstretched hand.

"Go," she said, in a smothered voice, pointing to the door; and Rosie, her evil work completed, left her, turning as she went out at the door to cast back a glance of mocking triumph at the little white crushed figure half stretched across the table, with her long, bright hair, and her pale lips, and horror-stricken eyes fixed upon the letter held between her shaking hands.

The letter—we have read it before—was the one Harold had written to Rosie from Scotland after he had left Fearn Castle for the first time—the letter in

which, in his first foolishness of miserable disappointment, and in the reaction towards her caused by May's refusal of his mock proposal, he had told Rosie that he "did propose to the rich young lady," her money being so great a temptation to a poor man; but that, "most providentially," she had refused him.

May read through every word of it from the "Dearest little Rosie" at the beginning down to the "Your loving Harold" at the end. She did not miss one single syllable. Then she stood up suddenly, and wildly tore off her white dress and velvet train, wrenched the gold circlet from her head, wound up her long hair into a close knot, then turning to her wardrobe, took out the first dark morning dress that met her hand, and attired herself hastily in it, and in a warm jacket and a black hat. Then she took up her travelling-bag and hastily thrust her purse and a few necessities into it. Finally, she tied a thick veil over her face, and went out of her room, slipped unseen swiftly and suddenly down a back staircase, and in five minutes more was halfway across the park in the direction of the station.

## CHAPTER XIX.

## LLANVELLY

A LITTLE straggling watering-place on the Welsh coast—a watering-place out of the season, with all the green shutters of its lodging-houses up, and half the windows of its two hotels closed—a watering-place which some of us know very well, but to which I will give a fancy name: let us call it Llanvelly. It stands high above the little bay, on the edge of a cliff which in summer-time is green with trees and bushes down to the edge of the sands; and there is a promontory running out into the sea to the right, crowned with a ruin dignified by the name of “The Castle;” with a fort beyond, and an old wall, and a picturesque old gateway at one side of the town. Does any one recognize the picture? I dare-say not; for every village in Welshland has its ruin of castle or church. Llanvelly, by the way, owns a fine old church, too, with a Norman doorway and Gothic windows, and a modern extinguisher of a steeple clapped on to the top of its dear old square tower, which goes far to spoil its external appearance. Somebody, in a fit of piety, erected it in memory of

a fellow-townsmen drowned at sea. What a terrible memorial by which to be handed down to posterity, is that disfiguring steeple!

But the church stands a little back from the cliff, and the cliff is the part of the town with which we are specially concerned on this particular January morning. Beyond the two hotels which stand like sentinels, one on either side of the turning which leads to the station—beyond the little row of melancholy lodging-houses—stand a few dwellings of a superior class, each detached from its neighbour, and each with a strip of garden in front of it. These are the abodes of the resident gentry of Llanvelly. For Llanvelly, be it known, has its resident society, who think a great deal of themselves, and turn up their noses at the summer visitors; and quarrel and fight and snarl amongst themselves, we may be sure, with as much spite and virulence, in this peaceful and remote corner of the world, as any of their betters can do in a more extended social atmosphere.

In front of one of these substantial detached houses upon the "Green," as this aristocratic corner of Llanvelly is termed, with his back to the sea and his face to the land—seated, in fact, upon the low wall on the edge of the cliff—is a gentleman discussing his morning pipe. He is tall, and broad-shouldered, and handsome; but, in spite of his broad shoulders and his regular features, he looks worn and wan, as though he had just fought through a bad illness; and

there are lines scored upon his face, and a slight forward stoop of his head, where the dark hair is plentifully streaked with grey, which make him look older than he really is.

As he leans against the low wall, the Welshwomen, in their frilled caps surmounted with the tall black hat that is still to be seen at Llanvelly and at a few other equally primitive places, pass by him and nod a friendly greeting. They are going in to the market with baskets of oysters—oysters small and succulent, which one can buy for one-shilling-and-threepence a dozen at Llanvelly—upon their arms. Where do they go, and who consumes them? and why do those Welsh oysters never come up to London, I wonder?

“Good day, mejor,” say the Welsh maidens, with their pretty little half-Irish accent, as they pass the tall gentleman smoking his pipe, glancing kindly at him with their saucy blue eyes; for a Welshwoman is a born flirt, whatever be her rank; and they blush and smile at him as they pass; for do they not all know the Miss Denhams on the Green? and is not this their brother, who came home so ill from India, to be nursed by his old sisters?

The population of Llanvelly, great and small, take an immense interest in Major Denham. Three months ago he was brought to his sisters’ house so ill he was not expected to live; and now that he is well again, and able to walk out and show himself, they all feel



as proud of his recovery as though they had one and all been in some way instrumental in furthering it.

But if the humbler inhabitants of Llanvelly feel proud of the presence of the convalescent major in their midst, what may be supposed to be the feelings of the Miss Denhams themselves upon the subject. The good ladies were never tired of expatiating to their acquaintances about the perfections of "our brother the major." Lionel Denham was, it is true, only their half-brother, and they had not seen him for many years, when his letter from India came saying how ill he was, and how he was coming home on sick leave, and that having no other relatives alive but his two old sisters he meant to come straight to them, and to throw himself upon their charity to nurse him till he was well.

Who can describe the delight with which they welcomed him; the solicitude with which they nursed him, and the pride with which they saw his gradual return to health and strength.

Amongst the resident gentry of Llanvelly there were, it must be owned, but very few specimens of the nobler sex. The clergyman, the doctor, and the curate, were of course to be found; but these were all married men. As to bachelors, they were scarce indeed. There was a gouty old gentleman, who went out in a Bath chair, and a deaf one who carried an ear-trumpet. A young man, save in the vacations, when one or two very youthful specimens came from

the Universities to see their mothers, was a *rara avis*. Judge, then, what a flutter was created amongst the widows and the unmarried elderly ladies, of whom the society of Llanvelly chiefly consisted, by the appearance in their midst of such a man as Lionel Denham. It was a positive social triumph to the Miss Denhams, as well as a private source of happiness to them, to have their brother domesticated in their house.

On this particular January morning, Lionel, whom we have left still smoking his pipe, and nodding to the women in their short petticoats and high black hats, suddenly perceives a very unaccustomed sight. A telegraph boy is making his way up from the station road in the direction of the Green, and presently, to Lionel's surprise, he turns in at the garden-gate opposite and delivers his missive at the Miss Denhams' house.

"Oh! Anne, there is a telegraph boy!" cries the younger Miss Denham, in dismay, as she catches sight of the small boy, with the missive of fate in his hand, who stands upon the door-step.

"Good gracious me!" replies Miss Denham the elder, and pulls her spectacles hastily off. The breakfast-things are being cleared away, and the little maid is in the room. "Run quick to the door, never mind the tablecloth," says Miss Denham; and the girl hurries off.

"Reply paid for, ma'am," says the girl, as she brings in the telegram, "and the boy is waiting for the answer."

Miss Denham is trembling so she can hardly fit her spectacles back on to her nose, so Miss Letitia takes the envelope from her hand and tears it open. A telegram is evidently an unaccustomed event in the lives of these good ladies.

"Read it out quick, Letty," says Miss Denham, nervously : and Miss Letty reads :

"From Miss Crocker to Miss Denham,

"Llanvelly.

"Am in great trouble. Can you take me in for a few weeks ? Send answer to care of Station-master, Gloucester. Should be with you by two o'clock."

"Miss Crocker ! My old pupil, May !" gasped Miss Denham. "Take her in ? Of course we will. Let me write the answer at once."

Years ago, before May Crocker went to have her education completed at the fashionable Brighton boarding-school of which mention has been made, and before the Miss Denhams had by their father's death come into what they modestly called a "comfortable competence," Miss Anne Denham had gone out as a governess, and for four years of her life had lived at Fearn Castle, and taught little May to hate Cromwell and Napoleon, and to love Charles the Martyr and the Duke of Wellington ; to weep bitter tears over the fate of the Pretender, and to consider his Majesty King William III. as only a shade less criminal than Richard the Hunchback ; to shudder at the name of

Voltaire, and to look upon Shakespeare as the greatest man God ever created ; together with many other wise and pious beliefs which we used to be taught when we were young, but which, alas ! are all out of fashion now. All these good things May had imbibed into her earnest little soul from Miss Denham's careful teaching, and she had never lost sight of her governess. Now, in the day of her trouble, she was coming to her old friend, and Miss Denham's heart glowed with pleasure and gratitude to think that she had not been forgotten by her pupil.

Meanwhile Lionel came sauntering up the garden-path to hear the news.

Miss Letty—who years ago had had a proposal of marriage, in virtue of which she was considered to understand the workings of the tender passion, and was treated, in consequence, with a certain amount of deference, curiously mingled with contempt, by her sister, to whom no such revelation had ever been vouchsafed—Miss Letty glanced at the handsome young brother—young at his five-and-thirty years to his old sisters—coming up to the house, and then half guiltily back at her sister :

“ Oh ! Anne, if they should——”

“ If *they*—if who, sister ? ”

“ Lionel and Miss Crocker—he so brave and good and handsome, and she rich and affectionate, and both young—oh ! sister, it seems providential——”

“ Oh ! Letty—Letty ! what thoughts, my dear ! ”

and the old lady positively blushed like a maiden all over her soft old face. "How can you think of such things? Indeed, it seems unwomanly, almost indelicate, to think so about two persons who have never met."

"Ah! but I have seen what men are," said the other, nodding sagaciously out of her own peculiar fund of knowledge of the male species. "If a young man is shut up in a quiet place in the same house with a young lady, I know what follows."

"What, my dear?"

"Why, love-making, Anne!"

"Do you really think so, Letty?" And Miss Denham looked almost as much alarmed as though she had actually caught her brother in her own drawing-room with his arm round Miss Crocker's waist. But if Letty said so, she supposed such an event might very likely happen. Letty had had a love affair, so surely Letty must know.

## CHAPTER XX.

## HOW MAY WAS SOUGHT FOR

IN flying so precipitately from Lord Dorrington's house nothing was farther from May Crocker's thoughts than to return to her father's. That, of course, was the first place where she would be sought for. Her lover would start off madly for Glasgow in pursuit of her, and, finding her there, would refuse to take that rejection of his suit from her lips which she was fully determined upon making by letter. Her father would be very angry with her, her mother would weep and upbraid her; Harold would swear fresh vows to her—false vows of disinterested love—and then, perchance, her own foolish heart, which, in spite of all his baseness and his perfidy, was weak enough to love him still, would join in the cry, and urge her to repent of her deliberate and unalterable decision.

Thus argued May to herself, as she was borne rapidly away in the train from Dorrington Station. It was evident to her that she could not go to her home. Where, then, should she go? She had taken a ticket for Gloucester, which was little more than an hour distant by rail from Wormington.

When she got there, she drove to an hotel, and spent the rest of the night sitting up writing to her mother. She had made up her mind to go to old Miss Denham's at Llanvelly, and she wrote and told her mother so, entreating her not to tell any of the Dorrington family where she was, as she was firmly resolved never to marry Harold.

"I dare not come home," she wrote, "to face papa's anger. I cannot marry as he wishes, indeed I cannot marry at all. I will stay with Miss Denham as long as she will keep me. Oh! why don't you and papa adopt one of Aunt Mary's little girls, and leave all the money to her, and give me two hundred a year and let me go and live with Miss Denham. Oh! how I wish I had been born in a cottage and had to work for my living; then, perhaps, some man might have loved me and made me happy, instead of seeking me for this dreadful money." All of which Miss Crocker, as she wrote, believed that she desired from the very bottom of her heart, though it is doubtful whether she would have altogether approved of the practical application of the cottager's life to herself.

One thing, however, was certain, and that was, that May was very unhappy. She loved Harold so much that she felt she could never marry any other man, and yet his perfidy to her seemed so great that to marry him now was impossible.

She wished that she had never found it out, that Rosie Wood had left her in the fool's paradise in

which she had believed herself happy ; then she would have married him, and, loving him so well, she might perhaps have been blinded for a little while to his mercenary motives in marrying her.

“ Even a year of happiness,” cried May, to herself, in her misery—“ even a year would have been better than this ! ” Better than thus to have her cup of joy dashed away ere even she had raised it to her lips !

In the morning she telegraphed to Miss Denham, and waited at the station for the answer ; and when it came she took the first train and went on to Llanvelly.

It was rather a shock to May’s scheme for perfect peace and retirement from a world which she had found so hollow and so full of miserable disappointment, that there should be a good-looking man domesticated in the household of her kind old governess, to whom she was introduced as they sat down to luncheon as :

“ Our brother, Major Denham, who is now living with us.”

May was inclined to look upon men in a hostile spirit just now ; all the troubles of her life had come to her through them, and she had thought that in the home of these quiet old maids, at least, the disturbing element would have been wanting.

Major Denham, however, kept his dark eyes fixed upon his plate, and beyond the ordinary civilities of



handing her the vegetables, and helping her to sherry, did not trouble himself to address her.

After luncheon he left the house for a walk, he said, Miss Letty, running out after him with a woollen comforter, which she insisted on winding round his neck ; and, to May's infinite relief, he did not reappear again till dinner-time.

Meanwhile, all unknown to the fugitive, the greatest confusion had reigned at Dorrington upon May's disappearance. For some hours no one of the family could believe that she had really left the place altogether. She must have gone over to the clergyman's house, or even to walk by herself in the garden. Something, no one could tell what, had angered the heiress, and she had evidently determined not to appear in the ball-room.

It was, however, impossible to send away the assembled guests ; to do so would be only to provoke questions about a difficulty which no one was able to explain, or even to put into conventional words. But instinctively it was felt that something was wrong. May's absence and the anxious faces of the members of the family made every one vaguely perceive that something unforeseen and disastrous had occurred.

The festivities broke up at an unusually early hour, and neither the host nor hostess attempted to retain their guests ; it was evidently a relief to them when they began to depart.

“There has been a shindy,” explained Mr. Bevan—“depend upon it there has been a shindy, and the heiress has chucked Dorrington over.” And this opinion was the one generally shared by everybody present.

But by the next day Harold’s uneasiness and anxiety had deepened into absolute terror.

May had neither returned of her own free will nor had she taken refuge at any of the neighbouring houses. The officials at the station could give Lord Dorrington’s family no reliable information: there had been many people coming and going by the evening trains, the festivities at the Hall had brought many persons on to and fro between Wormington and Dorrington. The ticket clerk was a stranger, and had only just entered upon his duties; he did not remember any young lady in particular; his own impression was that several young ladies had applied to him for tickets, but he could not recollect to what places the tickets had been taken. The station-master had been absent about ten o’clock; he had gone home for ten minutes to get his supper, he said; as to the porters, they contradicted each other flatly, one maintaining that he had seen a young lady get into the down train who was something like Miss Crocker in figure, and the other indignantly denying that any lady, old or young, with the exception of Mrs. Briggs, the mother of the landlord of the “George,” who had been spending

the day with her son, had got into the down train at all.

Then it was that, with a face pale as death, Harold gave orders that the river should be dragged. All day long the father and son were out together, watching the ghastly business, but nothing of course came of it.

"She fell into the river, Alice; I am certain of it," said Harold, despairingly, to his sister when he came in at last, sickened and wearied out with suspense and misery. "She must have gone out by herself in the darkness and have slipped down the bank."

• But Alice had other theories.

"Did I not tell you, Gussie," she said to her elder sister, "that if you had that girl from the village into the house to act, something dreadful would happen?"

"My dear Alice, you must be out of your mind."

And indeed to Augusta, who did not know what Alice did, the connection between May's disappearance and Rosie Wood's acting of Jessica was somewhat inexplicable.

"It is very strange, of course, about May; but what can poor Rosie have to do with it? Do you suppose she has murdered her?"

Even that solution did not appear altogether impossible to Alice's mind. Once during the course of the day she caught a glimpse of the beautiful village girl in the distance, at the end of the lime-tree avenue. When Rosie saw her, she turned round

quickly and walked away. Alice did not fail to mention this circumstance to her brother.

“ Depend upon it,” she said to him, “ Rosie knows something about her. I am convinced that she has had more to do with it than any one else. She had a motive for wishing her evil. I remember now that when ‘The Merchant of Venice’ was over, she slipped away upstairs before any of the others. I thought she felt ashamed of herself in her fancy dress and wanted to get it off quickly ”

Harold apostrophized Miss Wood in language that would be unfit for publication. He, too, felt with Alice that Rosie had a motive for doing May an evil turn, although he did not care to question Alice as to how she had become aware of the fact. He took his sister’s suggestion sufficiently to heart to make him walk down to the village after dinner, in order to call at the Woods’ cottage. But when he got there, he found that Rosie had just gone back to her aunt, the milliner at Wormington, and, as the last train had taken her, he was unable to follow her.

The next morning, however, brought relief from their worst fears. Mrs. Crocker, in answer to a telegram from Lord Dorrington, telegraphed back that, although May was not at home, she had just heard from her ; that she was quite well, and would write to Harold in a day or two and tell him why she had left so suddenly. Meanwhile she, Mrs. Crocker, hoped that they would make no further effort to

search for her, as she had gone to stay at the house of an old friend.

Harold spent two days of suspense and utter misery. He could not help guessing now what it was that had separated him from May. It was certain to him that, somehow or other, her anger with him and her flight had been caused by Rosie; and that something she had told May on the night of the theatricals had exasperated her into so desperate a step as leaving the house.

Harold had plenty of uncomfortable things upon his conscience with regard to Rosie, but it did not occur to him that she could have revenged herself upon him, and deliberately ruined his happiness, by showing his own foolish and imprudent letter to her rival.

He did not, in fact, remember much about that letter, nor what he had said in it. It had been written in a moment of impulse, under the sting of disappointment and wounded vanity; and the events that followed had engrossed so much of his thoughts, that he had hardly any recollection of its contents. Neither would it have occurred to him that little Rosie Wood, so beautiful, so fresh and innocent, such an untaught child of Nature, who loved him with such simple devotion, would be capable of so treacherous and hateful an action.

There was another letter with which, indeed, Rosie had once threatened him—the letter written more

than two years ago, in which he had, as she said, promised to marry her. To the best of Harold's belief the "promise" amounted to nothing more definite than the calling her "his little wife." That letter Harold did remember, and wondered whether Rosie had shown it to May. But that had been written so long before he had known May, that he did not believe she could be seriously angry with him on that account. Still, it was just possible; and then Rosie might have wept and made a scene, and May might have taken offence. But surely, when she wrote to him and asked for an explanation, he would be able to clear away all her doubts and suspicions, and to reassure her of his love and devotion to herself?

Thus arguing with himself, Harold spent the two days of suspense in wandering about the gardens miserably by himself, with his hands thrust into his pockets, his head bent, his eyes gloomily fixed on the ground, rejecting even the sympathy and kind words of his favourite sister.

During these two days Lord Dorrington, too, seemed ill at ease. Was it May's flight, and the too probable upsetting of all his plans for his son's welfare, which caused the old man to sit alone all day in his library, with bent back and eyes that stared listlessly into the fire? Or had he caught a chill whilst loitering about all day in the damp meadows by the river-side, when the men were dragging it?

Afterwards no one could ever tell; and at the time his wife and daughters never noticed the strange silence and apathy in the head of the house, who was wont to be so full of occupation and energy.

On the third morning Harold was up betimes, and out of the house in time to meet the postman as he came up the avenue with the letters. Mr. Dorrington stopped him, and eagerly rifled the contents of his bag. Yes, here it was at last—a letter in May's handwriting! Seizing it with breathless avidity, he turned away into the shelter of the shrubbery to read it alone and undisturbed.

Ten minutes later he came hurriedly back towards the house. Alice was standing at the open hall-door giving some directions to a groom, who hastened away towards the stables. Harold did not notice how pale and trembling his sister was.

"Alice!" he cried; and she saw him, and came down the steps to meet him.

"Oh! Harold," she said, and put out her hands to him as if for protection.

"I must be off at once!" said Harold, hastily, without noting these signs of distress and agitation. "I have heard from May; she has misunderstood me. I must go to her at once—instantly! It is absolutely necessary that I should go to her! She is in Wales—at Llanvelly!"

"May—May are you talking of?" cried poor Alice, distractedly "Oh! Harold, you cannot go

away ! You must come in to mamma at once ! Papa is very ill ! I have just sent Edward off to Wormington for Dr. Slade ! ”

“ What is the matter ? I will go in and see him if you like ; I can wait till after Dr. Slade has been. I need not go till the afternoon train. My father will be better by then, I daresay ! ”

“ Oh ! Harold,” wailed Alice, “ papa will never be better again ! He has had a stroke ! You cannot go away—he is lying quite unconscious on the floor ! ”

And then Harold followed her in, with a face as white and horror-struck as her own.



## CHAPTER XXI.

## MAY'S "CONSPIRACY"

AT the precise moment when Harold Dorrington was having the river in the park dragged for the body of his vanished lady-love, May herself was sitting rapt in thought upon a stone bench, on the small eminence jutting out to sea surmounted by the fragment of ruin which, as I have said before, bore the imposing name of "The Castle."

May had an open letter on her lap; she supported her small face between her two hands, and looked out to sea. There was an island, low at one end, high and precipitous at the other, about two miles off—an island to which, in summer time, picnic parties were always being organized. Between the island and the mainland the sea ran high and turbulent. The wind blew about her in wild gusts, with melancholy howlings.

It was always windy at Llanvelly; for ten months of the year the wind seemed never tired of howling. There were times when a woman could not walk down the main street of the town without being literally blown over. The inhabitants had got used to its

being windy; it was like the sand-hills to the right and the swampy marsh behind the town—part of the unalterable state of things at Llanvelly.

But May found it eminently disagreeable, and was thankful for the partial shelter of the hill and the small ruin behind her.

Lionel Denham, coming suddenly round the corner, stopped short at the unexpected sight of the small still figure crouched up in a corner of the bench, with the earnest thoughtful face and the far-away look in the eyes that were turned seawards. He looked at her silently, and then turned round and crept softly away unobserved and unheard.

"What is she thinking of?" he said to himself as he sauntered slowly away, with his hands in his pockets. "What are her troubles, I wonder? and how wonderfully fascinating that quiet little face is when it lights up!"—for already the subtle charm there was about May had begun to tell upon Miss Denham's brother.

What was May thinking about, as she sat motionless and absorbed in her own reflections?

May was conspiring. A conspiracy in which she alone was to be concerned, and which was to have for its end and object the deluding of several persons for her own private benefit and amusement.

How these sinister thoughts came to be harboured in Miss Crocker's simple mind must be traced to her mother's letter which lay upon her knee.

This letter had given her an unexpected piece of news. It told her that her father proposed to purchase, at most advantageous terms, a partnership in a large business in New York which had been offered him; that for this purpose he was obliged to start very suddenly for America, and that he was anxious that his wife should go with him.

Mrs. Crocker was much distressed at the breach between May and her lover, but had not dared to tell Mr. Crocker of it; and she suggested that it should be kept a secret from him for the present, and implored May to think better of it whilst she was away, and to make it up with Harold before long. She thought it desirable that May should remain at Llanvelly for the present; and as in any case her wedding would have had to have been postponed for three months owing to this American expedition, she thought it would be best only to tell Mr. Crocker that she had gone to Miss Denham's for the present, as being a more fitting house for her to remain in than Harold's during her parent's absence.

She concluded her letter by imploring May to write to her again, and to do nothing rash yet, as her father would be so terribly angry with her were he to imagine that, after everything had been so happily settled, she meant to break off her engagement at the last.

"Stay with Miss Denham," wrote poor Mrs. Crocker, "whilst we are away; but for mercy's sake, May, don't be in a hurry to quarrel with Harold; wait,

at all events, till me and your father comes back ; ” which, though ungrammatically expressed, was at all events sound and wholesome advice.

Now this letter had suggested to May an extraordinary idea. She would write to Harold and break off her engagement to him—not because of his attachment to Rosie Wood—not because of that convincing proof of his infidelity to her which that amiable damsel had shown her—but for a fictitious reason which she saw her way to inventing.

She would tell Harold that her father was ruined, and had had to leave England and go abroad to escape from his creditors—that she herself was now a penniless girl, and that therefore she thought it right to release him from his engagement.

In that way, said May to herself, she would test his sincerity indeed. She would give him one more chance.

For already her heart was relenting towards her lover ; already her conscience was reproaching her for having judged him harshly and unkindly, for having been in too great a hurry to condemn him unheard. She recalled all his affection and devotion to her, all his tender words, his loving looks—was she to give up all this ? she cried to herself, piteously, and her lip quivered and her eyes filled with tears. But then, again, the memory of that dreadful letter came back to her, and her face hardened again into anger and outraged pride. No, she could not forget it : she

would not forgive it ! But still she might give him one chance more. If he had loved her rich, then he would love her poor. And to try this love of his, whether it was real gold or only miserable pinchbeck ware not worth having, for this she would practise this fraud upon him and upon his family. She would give him one chance more, and herself (although she did not put it into words) one last hope.

Glasgow is a very long way from Dorrington. She did not think it at all likely that anybody there would doubt her story, for although the bankruptcy of a rich man like her father could not fail to appear in the Glasgow papers, and be much talked over by Glasgow people, neither papers nor people were likely to come in contact with the Dorringtons.

There were no mutual acquaintances, she said to herself, somewhat bitterly, between the Dorringtons and the Crockers, who could be questioned on the subject, excepting, indeed, Sir John and Lady Harrison, and they had started for Nice some days previously, and would not be likely to be able to contradict her story, even if they should happen in the course of time to hear of it.

So it was that when May finally wrote her letter to Harold, it contained no reproaches, no broken-hearted denials of his love, no angry recommendations to return to his village maiden whom he loved and had forsaken ; it was only a cold, formal note, stating that as her father had unfortunately become bankrupt, and

had been obliged to leave his country suddenly, she, of course, had no alternative but to release him at once from his engagement; and, begging him to thank his family for their kindness to herself, she signed herself his very sincerely, May Crocker.

That was the letter which reached Harold Dorrington the morning that his father was struck down with paralysis.

It is probable that but for that sad event May's transparent little fraud would not have remained long undetected. Lord Dorrington would have written at once to Mr. Crocker; the letter would have reached Fearn Castle before that worthy man's departure for America, and the "conspiracy," as May called it to herself, would have been immediately exposed.

Even had Harold been at leisure to think and to reason, he would soon have arrived at the same conclusion; but he was so upset and distressed by her letter, and then so immediately distracted by his father's illness, that he was hardly in a state to think or to act at all.

His first impulse had been to go off at once to Llanvelly. This, however, was of course an impossibility in his father's state. He did, indeed, write out a telegram to May, telling her of what had happened at Dorrington, and that he would write or come to her as soon as he could in answer to her letter; but by some fatality his telegram was never sent off. It was given to a housemaid to give to a groom, and

in the confusion and commotion that sudden illness always creates in a house the girl forgot it, and carried it about in her pocket for three days. When she did find it, she was so afraid of being scolded that she put it quietly into the fire and said nothing about it.

So May waited and waited in vain. There came no answer to her letter; day after day went by, and nothing came to her. Lionel Denham, watching her narrowly, saw that she was restless and unhappy, and that something was seriously amiss with her. He had felt a vague interest in her at first, an interest which had been gradually increasing ever since; and yet he and May rarely spoke to each other. One day, nearly a week after her letter to Harold had been sent, coming suddenly into the little drawing-room, he had found her there alone, and in tears. His first impulse was to withdraw; his second, to come up to her and say, kindly :

“Miss Crocker, you are in trouble. Forgive me for asking you if I can help you?”

“No one can help me, thank you,” she answered, hurriedly drying her tears.

“And yet there is a remedy for most things in this world,” he said, half playfully, standing up in front of her, and looking down at her with a kindly smile.

She looked up at him swiftly.

“Is there?” she said. “Do you think, when people break our hearts, there is a cure for it? Major

Denham, did anybody you love ever play false to you?"

The question struck home to him—down to the very heart of the man—stirring up troubled depths within him he had thought were still for ever.

He looked startled, almost angry for a minute. Then he answered her shortly and sternly: "Yes," and walked away from her to the window. "Is *that* what is the matter with you?" he said, presently, coming back to her, and bending down over her chair; "then I can feel for you, and advise you, too; for I have gone through that pain once, long ago. Stifle it down and outlive it, poor child; that is all you can do. Put it from you with an iron will; pray daily that you may learn to forget." And then he left her.

But from that day there grew up an unspoken sympathy between May and Lionel Denham—they understood each other.



## CHAPTER XXII.

## WELSH RUINS

MISS LETITIA DENHAM was perfectly convinced that Lionel and May were falling in love with each other. There were winks, and nods, and knowing little pursings up of her lips, by which she telegraphed her conviction to her sister all day long behind the backs of the interested couple. Miss Letty had the eyes of a lynx in the matter of love and courtship. If Major Denham gave May a chair, if he handed her a cup of tea, if he made the most trivial remark to her, Miss Letty was eager to interpret the smallest of these civilities into tokens and signs of dawning affection. May would sometimes go out after breakfast and walk up and down the cliff with Lionel, while he smoked his pipe. This fact gave some colour, even in old Miss Denham's decorous eyes, to her sister's suppositions.

"Depend upon it I am right, he is making love to her," said Miss Letty, as the two old ladies furtively looked out from behind the window-curtains at their two guests, wandering slowly and almost wearily up and down, side by side, together.

"He never says much to her," said Miss Denham, doubtfully.

"Why, my dear Anne, of course not! that is one of the great peculiarities of lovers—they *never* say much to each other—they always look sad and abstracted like those two—it is because of the doubt and heart-ache they suffer from, sister. Why, Shakespeare, you know, speaks of lovers sighing—it is part of the complaint, my dear."

Miss Denham did not presume to contradict her sister upon a subject she was so much better fitted to understand than herself; but she shook her grey curls and settled her spectacles on her nose a little uneasily. "Of course," continued Miss Letty, "those who don't understand cannot judge. I, who have gone through it myself, can tell the symptoms well enough when I see them." She talked of love as if it were the chicken-pox or the scarlet fever. "It would be a splendid match for poor dear Lionel."

"I doubt if it is quite right, Letty, to encourage such a thing under our roof, when May's parents have trusted her to our care whilst they are in America. I do not think that Mr. and Mrs. Crocker would approve of Lionel as a suitor for their only child, who will be very rich some day. They would blame us."

"If May were fond of him she would not care about what her parents thought. No one can blame us if they fall in love with each other. Marriages are

made in heaven, sister, and nothing we poor helpless mortals can do, can make or mar them."

Miss Denham was not quite so sure of it, but having no argument to advance to the contrary, and feeling, moreover, that she was debarred from entering into any argument whatever upon the subject of love and marriage by her own utter inexperience in the matter, she said nothing, and went on with her knitting in silence, leaving Miss Letty victor on the field.

Meanwhile Lionel and May wandered on up and down sadly enough, yet with sufficient sympathy for each other to find a certain pleasure and solace in being together.

For Lionel had told her something of his own story. It was very short—only a girl that he had loved in old days—a girl with a sweet gentle face and clear grey eyes that he had believed in, but who had cruelly deceived him.

"She loved me once, I think," said Lionel; "but when it came to the point, her love for me was not enough to make her give up a life of ease and luxury in her father's house to be the wife of a poor soldier. I think she led me on as far as she could just to throw me over at the last. I have no cause to think highly of your sex, Miss Crocker."

"Oh! don't say that!" said May's gentle voice by his side. "Because one woman was not true, is it a reason to be bitter against all? Believe me, such a story as yours is rare. There are few women who

would not give up everything—money, luxury, and ease—for the sake of a man's entire love and devotion."

She spoke earnestly and from her heart, flushing a little with her own enthusiasm.

Lionel looked at her with a sudden admiration.

"*You* would," he said, with a certain roughness of manner which he had occasionally, and yet which never gave offence. And it was characteristic of May that it never occurred to her to take the words in a more personal sense than they were meant.

"Yes; and so would hundreds of other women," she answered, earnestly and simply.

Lionel was silent for a minute before he answered her; and when he spoke again, it was slowly, and with a certain reticence.

"Hundreds of others?—yes, perhaps. But then, if one is haunted by one, what then? You see, it is more than two years ago now. I have been to India, and lain for weeks at death's door since then—and all that bygone time seems dim and unreal to me—and I often say to myself that I have forgotten her. I thank Heaven that I can say so. And yet the talking to you brings her back to me. These are things that are part of oneself, I suppose."

"It is very good of you to have spoken to me about it," said May, humbly. And she wondered a little why it was that he had done so, and what there was in her that men so often took her into their confidence.

"Are you quite sure that you have not been mistaken—that you have not been hard and unjust to her?" she ventured to ask, after a few minutes.

"She was false," he answered, sternly; and May felt that the subject must be dropped. They walked the whole length of the Green in silence, absorbed in their own thoughts. When he spoke again, it was in a lighter tone. "Don't let us speak of these things, Miss Crocker. Let us each forget our troubles; and since Fate has thrown us together, let us be as happy as we can."

May assented, smiling, and they spoke of other things.

It was a curious fact that Major Denham had, before Miss Crocker's arrival at Llanvelly, constantly stated that he was now quite well, and must very shortly bid farewell to his kind old sisters, and go up to town upon business which required his attention, but that he had of late been entirely silent upon the subject of his departure. Lounging about with May appeared to suit him; he wanted no other amusement. They walked out on the sands together, or among the tortuous country lanes, through leafless woods and across barren fields, to visit little country churches with squat Norman towers, or to find out some quaint, ruined tower among the hills, of which there are so many in Wales—all unnoted and unvisited, and hidden away in out-of-the-world corners. Lionel and May found them all out, and clambered about

their crumbling walls, speculating about their past history, and weaving romances over their possible inhabitants, all the way home. And in the long evenings they hunted up some old books on the history of Wales, and read up all the old legends, and became very wise indeed in Welsh lore; and May began to find that life at Llanvelly was very bearable indeed.

For by this time she had ceased to expect any answer to her letter. Harold had made no sign; she had tried his love, and it had been found wanting; therefore she said to herself that she would forget one so unworthy of her affection. But though she had made this heroic determination, and though she seemed happy and contented enough in Major Denham's society, at her heart she was miserable. She could not understand Harold's absolute silence; it was inconceivable; he should in common civility, she thought, have answered her letter in some fashion. Sometimes she could not help wondering whether he had ever received it, and but for the pride and jealousy, which restrained her, she felt almost tempted at times to write to him again. Once, indeed, she actually did begin a letter to him, but then swiftly there came into her mind the thought:

"He is making himself happy with that girl; he is glad to be rid of me!" and, with a gesture of scorn and disgust, she tore the sheet of paper before her into atoms.

And meanwhile Major Denham was very pleasant,

and kind, and sympathetic; he was quite as much interested in the old ruins as she was, and, crowning virtue of all, he made not the slightest attempt to make love to her.

For this latter excellent feature in his disposition, May, it must be told, gave herself the credit. She had not, of course, thought it necessary to repeat to her hostesses the fabrication of her father's bankruptcy; she would have been ashamed to have imposed upon the good ladies. But Miss May did say a word or two to Major Denham upon the subject in the early stages of their friendship, and before he had made those confidences to her about his own love troubles.

"If I tell him I am poor, he won't want to marry me," said May to herself, with a little chuckle over her own naughtiness, reconciling it to her conscience by the after reflection, "and then we shall become good friends, and enjoy each other's society far more."

So one day, when an opportunity offered itself, May had said to him:

"Don't tell your sisters, I should not like them to know, but my father has lost all his money, and instead of being an heiress, I am a poor girl, just like every one else."

Denham had begun to express regret and sympathy, but she had turned it off so lightly that he said to himself:

“Here is one woman, at least, who does not care about money!”

And from that moment there crept into his mind the unspoken thought that May was very dear and sweet, and full of womanly sympathy and attractiveness; and that if a man can't get the hothouse blossom he has once set his heart upon, it is no reason why he should not gather the little wild flower that grows along his path if he can take it. So that May's little speech, that she thought so clever and cunning, had not exactly the desired effect.

If May were an heiress, she was as far out of Lionel's reach as the moon, and he would as soon have thought of desiring that distant orb of light as the rich Miss Crocker. But May poor, was quite another person to May rich.

Major Denham, by the time that there had been many scrambles across fields and ditches in quest of ruins, and many evenings spent over the dusty books of Miss Denham's library, had come to the conclusion that he was not at all in love with May, but that, if he were, it would be a very pleasant state of things.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

## AN OLD LETTER

MEANWHILE at Dorrington Hall many sad and tragic things had taken place. Lord Dorrington was dead. He had lingered a week perfectly unconscious, and then he died without even a farewell word or glance to the sorrow-stricken family who watched around his bedside. There had never been a flicker of consciousness from first to last. It was hard upon them all, but hardest upon his wife, whose grief was most distressing to her daughters to witness. But that was not the end of their troubles. The day of the funeral came—a cold, wet day, with a bitter biting east wind. There was a walking procession to the churchyard across the park and through the village. It was found in the dead man's will to be his particular wish to be so carried to his grave; there were to be no horses, no mourning coaches, no funeral pomps whatever; he was to be borne upon the shoulders of men who had been his principal tenants, and who had loved and respected him for many years of his life, and such of them as wished were to follow his coffin on foot. Every detail was,

of course, scrupulously attended to. The dismal procession set forth with Harold bareheaded as chief mourner, at a slow and melancholy pace from the door of the Hall. It took them a long time to reach the churchyard in this fashion, and then there was the service in the cold, damp church, and the standing about round the grave afterwards. And all the time the rain poured down, and the wind howled, and the grass under foot became more and more sodden and saturated.

When Harold came home he said to Alice :

“I must go by the first train in the morning to Llanvelly ; you must break it to the mother and get her not to mind. I will come back as soon as I can, but I cannot leave May any longer ; it is strange she has written no answer all this time to my telegram.”

“You don’t look fit to go,” answered Alice ; “you look very ill, Harold.”

“Ill or well I must go to-morrow,” he answered.

But by the morning the new Lord Dorrington was light-headed—alternately tossing about wildly in a burning fever, or cowering down in his bed with shivering fits, and very soon it became known that he had been stricken down with a severe attack of typhus fever.

Then followed a long time of suspense and heart-rending anxiety. There were doctors and sick-nurses coming and going. Lady Dorrington never left her son’s bedside, save for an hour now and then when one of her daughters came to relieve her : there were

days of absolute terror, when every hour seemed likely to be poor Harold's last, and there were days of comparative hopefulness, when his recovery seemed possible and probable, only again to be followed by fresh relapses and fresh fears. All this time May was utterly forgotten by Lady Dorrington and her daughters. It did indeed occur to Alice that she ought perhaps to be written to, but she did not recollect the address she had given, and she could not find her letter to Harold. And then Alice knew that May's parents had left England, and believed that they were ruined. She did not know how to get at any of the Crocker family. Upon Alice, too, fell all the management of the disorganized household. She gave all orders, and saw to everything being done, and many things fell upon her hands which her mother had not the time and her sisters not the power of doing. For it was always Alice whom everybody turned to in time of trouble. Augusta and Louisa spent their days in weeping, and were comparatively useless; but Alice dried her tears and stifled her own sorrow to become her mother's right hand. Thus it was that she came to be hard at work one afternoon, shut up by herself in her father's library, looking over his papers.

"I cannot do it, Alice!" her mother had said to her; "not now, with all this fresh trouble. I cannot leave Harold's room, and your poor father's letters ought to be sorted."

"Let me do it, darling mother," pleaded the girl.

"Do you think you can, Ally? You know he kept everything, every letter he ever received, and often copies of his own answers. Such a foolish habit!—so often I have begged and prayed him to destroy them. See what a dreadful task it leaves; they must be all looked at, every one of them, to see there is nothing important—nothing about money arrangements, you know—and then they must be all torn up. I ought to do it myself, I know; but I shrink from the pain of it, my dear—and with my darling boy so ill——"

And poor Lady Dorrington burst into tears upon her daughter's shoulder.

"Dear mamma, I will do it. Give me the keys of the cupboards, and I will do my very best."

And so Alice, like a brave and good girl as she was, undertook the dismal task.

Dismal indeed it was. There were long shelves of whole cupboards crammed with neatly done up packets of brown, dusty letters, all docketed with the date, and sometimes with the subject, or with merely the names of the writers. Thus, there were packets labelled "Letters from my wife before our marriage;" "Letters from my mother relative to Harold's birth;" "Letters concerning Harold's schooling." There was no subject so trivial in the family history but that Lord Dorrington's methodical mind had not thought it desirable to preserve every letter upon it, neatly done up in parcels tied with red tape.

How sad it was! As Alice sat upon the ground, with a big basket on one side of her, into which she flung the torn fragments, and heaps of these dusty little bundles on the other, with the rain beating drearily against the windows all through the long, desolate afternoon, the tears kept on gushing up into her eyes as she worked.

How terribly sad it all was! These bundles of yellow love-letters, full of youthful hopes and joys; these pleasant, chatty pages, filled with loving expressions, with little jokes, with anecdotes of what "the children" had said and done long years ago.

There was one letter from an aunt, who was now dead and gone, talking of "little Alice"—who apparently had been staying on a visit to her—describing her pretty ways and childish remarks. It made Alice sigh and smile to read it. There was hardly a letter there of which the writer was not now lying cold and forgotten!

How glad Alice felt that she had spared her mother the pain of this miserable task; for, if it was painful to her at four-and-twenty, how much more so would it have been to her mother, with all the memories of her sixty-five years to be recalled by these records of past days and dead and gone friends and relations!

By-and-by she came upon letters of a different character. These were all relating to money-matters, and as Alice looked through them they were of a

scarcely less disturbing nature. There were packets docketed "Harold's Debts," that filled a whole shelf; and then letters from the family solicitor; and there were letters from people who held mortgages on the estate; and whole bundles of unpaid bills: and as Alice looked through them it became clear to her, that by the time all these debts were cleared off, her mother would be left very badly off, and that Harold's income would be so small that he would possibly be unable to live at Dorrington.

All this was very sad, and Alice felt low-spirited and miserable as she toiled through her work.

By the time that it was quite dusk she had nearly finished sorting and tearing up all the letters. She got up from the floor, feeling stiff and cramped, and lit a candle; then she went back again to her place in front of the low cupboards. They were all empty, she thought, and there was nothing more for her to do. Nevertheless, she took the candle and looked once more carefully on every shelf, to see if she had overlooked anything. And in so looking she caught sight of an envelope that had slipped down, and was sticking half up behind one of the shelves, wedged in between it and the back of the cupboard. She drew it out. A thin packet this, only two letters tied together carefully with thin red twine.

Only two letters. She turned them over in her hand. Ah! what was it that made her heart beat wildly, and then stand still with a sudden, sickening

despair! There, in her father's handwriting, written on the top of one of the envelopes, ran the words:

"Letter from Captain Denham concerning my daughter Alice, and copy of my Answer."

She sat quite still with the little packet in her hands, trembling violently. She heard nothing but the throbbing of her heart, she saw nothing but the words traced in the faded ink upon the yellowed envelope.

Ah! what terrible, hopeless revelation upon the story of her poor little love-tale was she going to receive? What did it mean? What letter had he written of which she had never known? Dared she open it? Was it right that she should read it? These questions rushed rapidly through her mind. It was something which her dead father had hidden from her, was it not a sort of sacrilege to the memory of the dead that she should seek to learn what he had concealed from her? But she *must* see it—this letter from her lover about herself. She felt that it was hers by right; she *must* read it.

She rose and carried it to the table, placing the candle before her, and sat down in her father's arm-chair. There, trembling still, she slowly unfastened the string. Two letters fell apart. One in her father's handwriting, the other—she remembered the bold, round characters well—in Lionel Denham's.

She read it. It was long, it was badly worded, it

was diffuse, and sometimes almost incoherent, but through it all the meaning was plain enough—the meaning of a man who loved a woman with all the strength of his honest heart; who had nothing great to offer her in this world's goods, but who promised to work for her, to wait for her, if needs be, and to make her, if he only had leave to win her, as happy as devotion and unselfish affection could possibly do.

With eyes blinded with bitter tears, Alice turned from this letter to her father's answer. It was very short:—

“DEAR CAPTAIN DENHAM,

“Whilst fully sensible of the gentlemanlike feeling which prompted your addressing your letter to myself, so sparing my daughter the painful task of answering it—and whilst appreciating greatly the honour you have done her in offering her your hand—I must not shrink from telling you that I do not consider your income and prospects sufficiently good to induce me to listen to your proposal,—an opinion in which my daughter fully coincides. I think it, therefore, best that you should discontinue your visits here. Trusting that you will acquiesce in the wisdom of our decision,

“I remain, yours very truly,

“DORRINGTON.”

The letter dropped from her fingers, and Alice's head sank down upon her outstretched arms on the



table before her. She did not weep, she did not faint; only all her gentle heart arose within her, in angry protest against the blow that had been dealt to her—the blow that came to her thus from the hand of her dead father!

“Ah! cruel—cruel!” she cried out to herself, in her bitterness of soul: cruel irony of her fate, that she should know of this man’s love only to find it out when it must have long perished and faded away! whilst her own—God help her!—was still fresh and young within her. Oh! why had her father treated her so? Had she not always been a good daughter to him?—good, dutiful, and obedient? Had she ever rebelled against his decrees or thwarted him in his wishes? Why had he played her this terrible, this cruel trick? Why had he allowed her to imagine herself forsaken and deceived by the man she loved for all this weary time? And he—who believed her a party to that cold, cruel letter!—how he must have scorned and reviled her!—how hateful she must have appeared in his eyes—a woman who could look love at him and then agree to the writing of such a letter! How he must have despised her! There was the terrible bitterness of it; and she could do nothing!

This discovery meant neither hope nor happiness for her. Being a woman, she could not start forth and seek him, and show him these long-hidden letters: she did not even know where he was—in India, she supposed. Long ago he must have uprooted her image

from his heart, as one who was false and utterly unworthy.

She lay there crushed—absolutely stunned—it might have been minutes, it might have been hours—she never knew. And at last a flood of tears came to her relief—sobs and wails that shook her from head to foot.

“Oh, father! father!” she cried out, aloud, “how could you do it? How could you break my heart? how can I bless your memory, now?—how think of you without bitterness and reproach?”

And there was no answering voice to soothe and to comfort her, only the clock ticking steadily on in the half-darkened room, and the ceaseless patter of the winter rain against the window-panes.

## CHAPTER XXIV

## LADY HARRIET NORTH'S LADY'S-MAID

ADOLPHUS, Earl of Alford, was crossing the market-place of Wormington, with an umbrella over his head, an eyeglass, as usual, in his eye, and his diminutive person encased in a long, shiny, white waterproof coat.

"Hallo! Dolly," said somebody behind him, tapping him on the shoulder.

Dolly drew up with a start, and his eyeglass dropped out.

There stood Thomas Bevan, Esquire, of Her Majesty's 213th, also enveloped in a waterproof coat, with a little stream of water running down from the brim of his wet pot-hat, in front of his nose.

The ordinary Englishman's greeting was straight-way exchanged :

"Nice weather, this?"

"Beastly!"

"What on earth are you doing down here?"

"Oh! you may well ask," replied Dolly, making frantic efforts to make the eyeglass stick in again, and to talk at the same time. "Now I bet you any odds

you like in half-crowns, you don't guess what I am looking for this morning. Give you three guesses."

"My dear fellow, I haven't got any half-crowns, and I never could guess a riddle in my life. Give it up. You had better tell me."

"I am looking for a lady's-maid."

Tom Bevan burst out laughing.

"For yourself? Oh! Dolly, Dolly, you sad little dog!"

"I thought you'd laugh. But, 'pon my life, it's no laughing matter, I can tell you. I have been all over the town, into all the drapers' shops, and asked every woman I've met. There don't seem to be a spare lady's-maid in the whole blessed place."

"Why, what the——"

"Oh, I'm coming to that. It all comes of being good-natured, my dear boy. Never be good-natured, or you'll have to look out for ladies'-maids. That's the moral; now I'll tell you the tale. I've got my sister Harriet North here, you know—her husband died about six weeks ago, and she's got hysteria, or westeria, or some such remarkable disease, which entails her being as helpless as a baby, and as cross as a cat, and her doctor ordered her to go to Llandudno, or Llanvelly, or one of these Welsh sea-side places, for sea air or some such rubbish. Nothing would satisfy her but that I should come with her and 'settle her,' as she calls it, there. So off we started from town, and when we got as far as this place—what a

beastly hole it is, I suppose you are quartered here, Tom?—well, her maid fell ill, and declared she couldn't go a step further. So here we had to stop; we went to the hotel last night, and this morning the maid comes out all over rash, and has got scarlatina or something, and my sister orders her out of sight, and packs her off to the hospital, and goes into hysterics herself; so here I am hunting for a lady's-maid. Nothing will induce her to go on without a maid, and we shall be stuck at this cheerful place until we find one; so we shall probably take root here. You couldn't help me, my dear fellow?" added Dolly, with an anxious gravity, which caused Mr. Bevan to burst out into a fresh convulsion of laughter.

"It's the finest joke I ever heard of in my life. The adventures of Dolly in search of a lady's-maid! Comedy, in three acts."

The young men were walking slowly towards the hotel, wending their way with some difficulty through the crowd, for it was market-day, and the streets were full, in spite of the wet weather.

As they pushed through a knot of men standing on the sloppy pavement, all talking together at once, Tom Bevan caught the sound of Lord Dorrington's name, and stopped to inquire of the farmer who was talking of him whether he had heard how he was.

"You knew poor Dorrington?—Harold, I mean? The old man died a fortnight ago, and Harold is very ill—no better, I hear," he said, as he rejoined his friend.

"What, Harold Dorrington?" cried Dolly, stopping short. "Of course I know him. What is the matter with him?"

"Typhus," replied his companion, laconically.

"Good God!" They walked on, side by side.

"Did you know," began Dolly, confusedly, whilst he turned red down to the tips of his ears—"did you happen to meet there—was she staying there lately? I mean the lady he is engaged to—a Miss Crocker?"

"Oh! the heiress, you mean?" answered his companion, carelessly. "Oh! all that is broken off."

"*What?*" Dolly started violently, and clutched Tom Bevan by the arm.

"My dear fellow, don't be so violent. What is the matter? The heiress is no good to you, I suspect, for there is a rumour that she has lost all her money, and is an heiress no longer—father gone smash, I believe; it's always the way with these millionaires. So you needn't prick up your needy ears, you little spendthrift!"

"Is it possible!" said Dolly, below his breath, unheeding his friend's pleasantries, whilst a great glow of joy filled his little heart; "and you say, Bevan—you say the engagement is broken off?"

"Yes, so I've heard—at any rate she left the place very suddenly. They say she behaved like a trump—heard of her father's ruin, and broke off her engagement instantly—a sensible girl that!"

"And Dorrington? Do you mean to say that he submitted—that he was base enough?"

"Why not? He is awfully hard up. Mortgaged up to the eyes. What is the good of heroics in such a case? I should think he was only too glad to be let off. No one, you know, would desire an alliance with the house of Crocker solely and simply for the honour and glory of it."

"No; I suppose not," replied Dolly, musingly, but his heart beat tumultuously within him. May, sweet winsome May, with her smile and her pretty ways, and her dainty little figure, dangled once more within his reach. He was off on a day-dream hundreds of miles away from Tom Bevan and Wormington High Street at once.

"Here we are at your hotel," said the voice of his friend, arousing him out of his meditations; "and I don't envy you if you have to stop much longer under the shelter of its hospitable roof; it's the dearest, dirtiest, worst managed country inn in England. Hallo, Jessica!"

The last exclamation was uttered with vivacity, as a young woman, coming rapidly round the corner of the street, ran full tilt against the two young men with her unfurled umbrella.

Up went the offensive weapon, disclosing to view Rosie Wood's lovely face, blushing confusedly from under its shadow

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Bevan!"

"Granted, my dear," answered the irresistible Tom, making use of his eyes with considerable freedom, for the female attractions of Wormington were scanty, and Mr. Bevan had been only too glad to strike up a flirtation with the lovely heroine of "The Merchant of Venice," having met her in the street the very first day of her return to her aunt's. "Why do you splash your pretty little toes, Jessica, by coming out in the mud? Can I do anything for you to-day?"

"Nothing, thank you, sir. I've just quarrelled with my aunt, and I don't mean to stay in Wormington much longer, I can tell you. Good-by," and Rosie was passing onwards, but turned back to say laughingly, "You don't happen to know of any one who wants a lady's-maid, do you, sir?"

"Here! hi!" cried out Lord Alforth, violently, as if he were hailing a hansom, seizing the departing damsel by one arm. "I'm your man!" and Tom Bevan, catching her by the other, went off into such fits of laughter that he became utterly incapable of language. At which proceeding Rosie Wood appeared profoundly astonished, standing still between her captors, and looking from one to the other with blank amazement, as if she considered them to have both gone mad.

"He—he! Oh! goodness, Dolly! My dear Jessica, this is indeed providential, *he* wants a lady's-maid!" gasped Tom, in the intervals of his laughter.



"Don't be a fool, Tom," interrupted Dolly, seriously, for he did not see the situation in the same comic light. "My dear young lady, I am looking out for a lady's-maid for my sister; she is at this hotel. You are—ah—hem!—decidedly good-looking and—ah—therefore just the very thing she wants. Come in and see her at once; her name is Lady Harriet North—mine is Lord Alforth. Yours is——"

"Rose Wood, my lord."

"Very well, come along."

And he drew the still bewildered Rosie towards the door of the hotel.

"She isn't going to stop here?" asked Rosie, as they entered.

"Oh dear, no, going on to Wales by the next train—Llanvelly, I think."

"Llanvelly, did you say, my lord? Yes, if your sister goes to Llanvelly, I will take her situation with pleasure," said Rosie, with decision.

"You are an angel, and an uncommonly pretty girl into the bargain," was Dolly's last audible remark, as they disappeared under the shadow of the hotel doorway; whilst Tom Bevan turned away, laughing still over the whole adventure.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was rather more than a fortnight later that young Lord Dorrington, leaning on his sister's arm, and looking very pale and white and thin, walked

slowly from his carriage into the station one morning, and, taking a ticket for Llanvelly, got into the Welsh express train.

“Good-by, Harold; take care of yourself. I wish you would let me come with you,” said Alice, standing on the platform, and looking wistfully at him.

“No, no; I had better go alone,” he answered, somewhat fretfully. “I shan’t be long. I shall bring her back with me to-morrow. Of course, she will come back with me when she sees I have come for her.”

The train moved off, and Alice was left behind, leaving Harold to his meditations. He was very weak still—not really fit to travel: but his anxiety and suspense on May’s account were retarding his recovery so much, that it had been thought best to let him have his own way.

He felt so sure that, as soon as she saw him, May would be only too glad to come back to the sheltering arms of his love. As to her being poor, what did that matter? It was a pity, of course, and they would have to let Dorrington, and go abroad and live cheaply somewhere. But how nice it would be to wander about Italy together; to spend winters in Rome, spring-time in Naples or Venice, and to dream away the summer hours on the shores of Como or Maggiore! What would poverty matter to two people who loved each other so much and could be so happy together as they would be?—for, after all, as

he had told her once, she was "just May"—no one else was like her—no one else came near her.

His father's death, his own severe illness, had made Harold think very seriously and sadly of his past life and its follies and extravagances. Now he would make a fresh start and begin life anew, and with May by his side he felt strong enough to bear any loss and any privation.

Thinking thus, the railway journey drew to a close. His heart beat at the thought of seeing her again so soon. At length the train steamed slowly into Llanvelly station. Harold got out, told the porter to send up his portmanteau to the hotel, and started off on foot.

And as he turned out of the station-yard into the street the first person with whom he came face to face was Rose Wood.

## CHAPTER XXV

## ENSNARED AGAIN

THE meeting was purely accidental. Rosie had had no more idea of meeting Harold than Harold had of meeting her.

With an exclamation of surprise on both sides, they stood still and stared at each other in mutual embarrassment.

"What on earth brings *you* here, Rosie?" said Harold, at last. "You are the last person I should have expected to meet at Llanvelly."

Rosie could not exactly retort that Harold was the last person she had expected to meet there, because, sooner or later, she had been pretty sure that it was at Llanvelly that she would meet him; indeed, she had come there for no other purpose, having received private information through a friend of hers, a Llanvelly girl, who was under-housemaid at Dorrington Hall, that Miss Crocker was staying there.

"I don't suppose it was to meet *me* you have come here," was her only answer to Harold's remark.

"No, it was not," acknowledged Harold.

"You have come to see Miss Crocker?"

Harold began to feel very uncomfortable.

They were by this time sauntering on together along a back street. Llanvelly is never a populous place; even in the summer its streets are well-nigh empty; and now, save for a couple of tall-hatted Welsh girls going on before them, conversing volubly in their native tongue, Harold and Rosie had the street to themselves.

Lord Dorrington, after the manner of people who feel guilty and conscience-stricken, began to make excuses.

"Surely it is not wonderful that I should come to see Miss Crocker. I have been very ill, you know, and now I am better again, it is natural that I should want to see her. When a man is engaged to a girl——"

"Oh! *are* you engaged to her?" said Rosie, with a slight uplifting of her dark eyebrows, and she laughed a short contemptuous laugh. This man—though he was a lord, and she only a labourer's daughter—was so evidently afraid of her, it amused her rather.

"Of course!" he answered, sharply.

"Indeed? I don't think it looks much as if she thought so."

"What do you mean?" questioned Harold, angrily

"Oh! nothing. You want to see Miss Crocker. Shall I take you to her? I saw her not ten minutes ago."

"Where is she?"

"Come, and we will find her."

They walked along together under the shadow of the high old wall, once the boundary of the little fortified town. The chattering Welsh girls disappeared in the distance under a ruined gateway.

Lord Dorrington cast furtive glances at his companion. He noticed that she was well and even smartly dressed. She wore a dark silk skirt, a neat black cloth jacket, and a little close-fitting straw bonnet, with red roses in it. He thought her better dressed, but less lovely, than she used to look in her old pink cotton gown, with a rough shawl over her head. Still, Rosie in any dress had a certain neat daintiness about her far removed above the station to which she was born.

"What are you doing here, Rosie?" he asked her kindly; he wanted to be friends with her. After all, he said to himself, he had behaved badly to her once; he owed her, at least, patience, and a certain amount of affectionate interest. Besides, who could be angry long with a woman with such a face? "What are you doing? You are very well dressed I see."

"I am staying here at the hotel; I have got a place as lady's-maid."

"I am glad to hear it; I hope you will keep it," answered Harold, in a slightly authoritative and patronizing manner.

Rosie just flashed one look up at him—a look of scorn and jealous rage—from under her dark lashes, and she laughed again, shortly and unpleasantly.

"It is a rise in life for me, isn't it, my lord—for poor Rose Wood, who was to have been your wife?"

Harold bit his lip and was silent.

By this time they had emerged upon the cliff; it was on the further side of the town to the houses on the Green. Here, there was only a long desolate row of empty lodging-houses, and the cliffs were not clad with trees, but ran down rugged and bare to the shore.

It was low tide, and the sands lay flat and wide between the land and the waves; a narrow, steep flight of steps led downwards from the top of the cliff. Rosie ran lightly down them, and Harold followed her. When they reached the sands, not a living being was in sight, only the wide, open sea, and clumps of dark sea-weed lying about on the wet surface of the shining sands.

Presently, however, as they walked onwards, the face of the cliff became rent into numberless little bays and coves, each of which might have held a dozen people. They were well sheltered from the north winds, and seemed to be a popular resort. In the first they came to was a whole troop of little children and their nurses, splashing with wooden buckets, digging with wooden spades, building up sand castles and then knocking them down again, with shouts of delight to each other. In the second was a party of Welshwomen, in their picturesque costume, grouped about on a clump of rock, all chattering together, and reminding Harold forcibly of a scene out of an opera.

Next came an empty little cove with nothing but sand and shells, and a solitary crab clambering over some brown sea-weed.

After that Rosie suddenly put her finger to her lips, and began climbing up a spur of the cliff that stretched itself further than its fellows out over the sands.

Harold followed her, and when she stood still he, too, stood still and looked.

There, below them, under the shadow of the rock, sat May—his own May, whom he had risen with such pain and difficulty from his bed of sickness to come so far to find. There she sat, with a little flush upon her cheeks and a smile upon her lips, with her hands clasped round her knees, and her eyes, not weeping and heavy, laden with sorrow and anxiety, as he would have liked to have seen them, but calm and happy, and a little bit dreamy, as they looked away out towards the distant horizon. And at her feet, stretched at full-length upon the sands in the most lover-like attitude, lay a tall, handsome, dark-haired man—a man whom Harold Dorrington recognized instantly.

He saw them, and then with a smothered oath he turned round and walked swiftly away, Rosie following him.

“You saw him—you remember him?” said Rosie, eagerly, as they walked. “It is your sister’s old lover, you know, who went away to India. You will be able to tell her of this, won’t you?”



But Harold answered her never a word; he only stalked along pale, angry, and maddened with jealousy, till they had reached the top of the steps and stood once more upon the cliff. Then he turned round to her and caught her savagely by the wrist.

“You are a devil!” he said, wildly and furiously.

“I am a woman whom you have wronged, Harold Dorrington,” she answered, quietly “Is it wonderful that I should take my revenge if I can? It is but a small retaliation for all that I have suffered at your hands.”

“I have never wronged you. There are many men in my rank of life who would have injured you grievously—there are many who would not have spared you. What harm have I ever done you?”

“Is it no harm to have broken my heart?” she cried, piteously, with a wail of pathos in her voice, standing still as she spoke, and looking up at him with one of those looks with which in the old days she had turned his head and made a fool of him.

And he believed in her once again.

He looked at her lovely eyes, all wet with tears, at the parted blossom of her lips, trembling, as it seemed to him, with emotion, at her clasped hands, at the little pucker of grief and misery on her smooth white forehead, and as he looked at her he fell once more under the spell of her fatal beauty. He did not love her. he felt almost that he hated her, but he believed in her.

She at least loved him, whilst May, the woman he loved, was making herself happy with another !

And then Rosie said to him, brokenly and miserably :

“ You have flung my heart away ; you have made me suffer such pain as you cannot even guess at. You have made my name a byword among my own people, so that I have had to leave home and go away among strangers. The man, in my own rank of life, who would have married me has given me up. How then can you say you have done me no harm ? ”

The last arguments were well chosen. It was all false, a tissue of lies ; but Harold believed every word she spoke ! How disbelieve in such well-acted distress ?

“ I have behaved very badly to you, God forgive me ! ” he said, humbly. He took her hand in his, and they walked on together in silence along the road they had come.

“ Tell me,” he said, hesitatingly, “ are they engaged, those two ? Have you heard it for *certain*, Rosie ? ”

“ Oh ! yes ; every one says it,” she answered, boldly and confidently, for she felt possibly that success was within her grasp ; and she knew that ‘ Nothing venture nothing have.’ was a safe maxim to follow ; and then she added softly : “ She has not loved you as I do, Harold.”

“ No ; I believe you are right,” he answered, shortly, and was silent again for a few minutes. They had got back within sight of the station again. There was an

up train which Rosie knew to be due in about ten minutes. Harold was evidently intending to go away by it, and the minutes were slipping away and nothing definite had been said.

Rosie felt desperate. She knew it was her last chance; if he went away without speaking now, she would lose him. Once clear of her influence, he would be free; and Alice, whom she hated, against whom she had sworn vengeance ever since that day when she had brought her back her locket—Alice would prevent her brother from returning to her.

She stood still and spoke his name. It was like the last venture of the well-nigh ruined gambler—it meant to her either Dorrington Hall and a title, everything she had longed and striven for so long, or else utter despair and nothing!

Her heart beat wildly—but her courage rose too—she staked everything upon her next words, and she had so little time to reflect how they were to be chosen! . In her dire perplexity she said perhaps the best and simplest thing she could have said to effect her purpose:

“Harold, won’t you keep your old promise to me, and marry me after all?”

And then he stopped and took hold of both her hands.

“Rosie,” he said, gently, “I am a very miserable man. If I once fancied I loved you and made you think so, I am deeply sorry for it, for I know now

that, greatly as I admired you—and do still, Rosie dear—the only woman I ever shall love in my life is May Crocker. But I know that you love me, and I feel that you have a claim upon me. My dear, if you care for a husband who will be kind to you, but who loves another woman and not you, then I will marry you.”

Possibly he did not believe she would accept him after such words. No woman of the slightest refinement could have taken a man on those terms, but to Rosie Wood it was the moment of her triumph—the supremest bliss of her whole life! She could not hide the flush of delight that covered her face, nor the gleam of joy that glittered in her eyes. What did she care for Harold’s love! He might love whom he pleased as long as she got what she wanted—as long as she was mistress of Dorrington! To be made a lady of, to lord it over her native village, to sail by in her carriage, wrapped in rich silken garments, whilst they, her old friends, trudged along in the mud, and made their humble obeisance to “My lady” as she went by—that was all Rosie Wood wanted! What a poor fool Harold was to talk about *love*! what did she care about love!

So it was, that she thus made answer to his proposal:

“I daresay we shall love each other well enough, Lord Dorrington; I am quite ready to take my chance of that, and to marry you.”

And then they parted without another word.

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

## A DISCOVERY

MAJOR DENHAM and May, all unconscious of how their *tête-à-tête* had been watched, walked slowly homewards across the sands. They did not go back the same way that Harold and Rosie had taken. May wanted to call at a stationer's shop in the High Street on her way back, and they went a longer way round. There had been no such words of love spoken between them as Harold, in his frenzied jealousy, had depicted to himself. There had been few words, in fact, of any kind; they were both of them unusually silent to-day.

It was one of the features of this strange friendship which had sprung up between them that they did not think it necessary to entertain each other; they often walked along side by side in perfect silence for minutes at a time, and yet they enjoyed being together after a fashion.

May's thoughts were very far away, but Lionel was thinking of May. As they slowly began to ascend the steep road that led from the sands to the main street, he said to her, somewhat suddenly :

"May, do you think you could be happy with me?"

"I *am* happy with you, Major Denham," she said hastily, flushing deeply; a sudden terror at her heart making her purposely misunderstand his words. It was the first time he had ever called her by her Christian name.

"That is not what I mean. Hush! don't stop me," for May had put up her hand suddenly to arrest his words. "You know my story, and I pretty well know yours. We have both been very unhappy in the past, but is there to be no future for either of us? May, if you had not told me that you had become poor, and that your father had lost his fortune, I should not have ventured to have said this to you."

And thus it was that May discovered for the first time that there was one man at least who would marry her without her money, only he did not love her as she desired to be loved; neither did she love him.

"Major Denham," she said, very gravely, "pray let these words be as if they had never been spoken. You know, and I know, that it would be a mere delusion. You speak of a future. Yes, there is a future for you—a future with the woman you love. I am quite sure that there has been some misunderstanding that has parted you. I do not know her—I do not even know her name; but all along I have felt certain that if you will only humble your pride, and go and find her, and ask her again to love you—not by letter, but face to face—that you will win back your lost happiness.

No, pray don't interrupt me! Do not delude yourself into thinking that you have forgotten her for me, for I know very well—how does one know these things? by instinct, I suppose!—that you love her still as much as ever."

They walked on in silence for some minutes. Lionel fixed his eyes moodily on the ground and looked rather sulky. He knew at the bottom of his heart that what she said was true, but the implied rebuff to his proposal piqued and wounded him; for a man's vanity is more easily hurt than his heart. But at length his better nature triumphed over his ill-temper, and he held out his hand to her.

"I believe you are right," he said, adding, with a little emotion, "You are a good woman, May. God bless you!"

"And you will take my advice about her?" said May, as she took his proffered hand and pressed it warmly.

"I will see about that. I will at all events think it over."

"Thank you," she answered, heartily. "And now here is the shop. I wonder if my parcel is ready?"

The parcel, of course, was not ready, and they waited a few minutes whilst it was being tied up. The worthy shopman, whose customers were few, seemed utterly unable to find the necessary paper and string, and finally, according to the primitive customs of Llanvelly tradesmen, he wrapped it up in a torn

sheet of newspaper, which, with an apology to May it is true, he handed across the counter.

They went out of the shop, May carrying her own parcel, for Lionel was still so absorbed in meditating upon the somewhat exciting words that had lately disturbed the even current of their ordinarily placid conversation, that he did not offer to take it from her hand.

Now the Miss Denhams cared little for the sayings and doings of the distant world which lay outside and beyond the little Welsh watering-place which was now the centre of their lives. Kings might be dethroned, emperors and popes might die, nations might fight, and dynasties be overthrown; it mattered little to the good ladies on the Green. As long as they could be assured the curate was not introducing High Church novelties into the humdrum Sunday service, as long as they could read through the list of arrivals and departures at the "White Lion Hotel," and be quite posted up in the quarrels between the station-master and the butcher, who were known to be deadly enemies, and were confidently expected some day to cut each others throats upon the sands, the Miss Denhams were utterly indifferent to what else might be going on in the world at large. Thus it was that the only paper taken in at the house on the Green was that most interesting and ably written publication, the *Llanvilly Gazette*. Major Denham always went to the reading-room to see the



*Times*, but May had been forced to put up with such information as could be afforded by the local paper, and it had been remarkably scanty.

Walking along silently, carrying her little parcel of blotting-paper and pens in her hand, May's eyes mechanically rested upon the half-sheet of the *Times* in which it had been wrapped. It was a very old paper—rather more than a month old; and it so happened that the obituary was what she was looking at with eyes which hardly realized what it was that they saw.

Suddenly a well-known name rivetted her attention, and roused her all at once from the reverie in which she, too, as well as her companion, had been absorbed.

An exclamation of horror and dismay broke from her.

"Oh, he is dead—he is dead!" she cried, and pointed out a name among the deaths to her startled companion.

"My kind old friend, who was so good to me! Oh! can it be true? And see, it is ever so long ago: the paper is more than a month old, and I have never known of it. Oh, poor old Lord Dorrington!" and May burst into tears.

"Lord Dorrington?" repeated Lionel, bewildered. "Yes, I saw his death in the *Times* days ago. Did you know him? You don't mean to say that you knew him?" and there was a sort of dismay in the

question which May was too distressed and upset to notice.

"Of course I knew him," she answered, weeping; "I know them all; they are my dearest friends. Oh! how brutal they must have thought me never to have written them a line in their sorrow. My poor darling Alice, what grief you must have been in, and I have never known of it!" And she hurried onwards eagerly.

"*Alice Dorrington!*" said Major Denham, and this time the uncontrollable agitation in his manner attracted her attention.

"What, do you know her?" she asked, looking puzzled.

"Do I *know* her?" he said, hoarsely, with something that was almost a groan, and then May knew the truth.

"It was *Alice*?" she cried—"it was Alice whom you loved? Alice, who is the dearest, best, most true-hearted of women! Oh! Major Denham, how glad I am that I know it. Why did you not tell me long ago? Alice loves you to this day; she has never deceived you or played you false—she is incapable of falseness—be sure you have made some dreadful mistake about it. I guessed long ago that she has had an unhappy love affair—she almost told me so once—and if you had seen her eyes fill with tears and heard her trembling voice as she alluded to her past troubles one day to me, you would not have

doubted her. If she had only told me your name, how much sorrow you would have been spared! Oh! how glad—how very glad I am!”

And what May was so particularly glad of was that she had been brave enough to put so decided a quietus on Major Denham's little attempts at making love to herself. Truth to say, there had been some temptation to her in the notion. Not that she loved him, but that he had been so pleasant, “so nice,” as she said to herself in that all-powerful feminine phrase, that even a little sentimental love-making, and nothing more, would have whiled away the time and been enjoyable, had she not felt so strongly that, under existing circumstances, it would have been dangerous.

But now how glad, how thankful she felt that she had been brave and true-hearted. What a dreadful thing it would have been if she had drawn him into a definite proposal, which it had only wanted one decided word of encouragement from her to do, and then if she had accepted him and had made this discovery about Alice directly afterwards, how dreadful it would have been! What an escape they had both had!

And that probably was the tenor of Major Denham's thoughts also—he also echoed her words:

“How glad I am!” but would have found it somewhat embarrassing to have been forced to explain what he was specially glad about.

But there was no need of words. They understood each other, and that was sufficient for them both.

The tears for Lord Dorrington's death were still glittering on May's cheeks as she passed the "White Lion Hotel," but they were so eclipsed by the radiance of her face over this wonderful discovery about Alice and Lionel that Rosie Wood, peeping cautiously out from behind the white curtains of Lady Harriet North's bedroom in the hotel, might be excused if she really and truly began to believe in the lie she had so lately uttered to Harold. She said to herself that she had spoken the truth after all, and that the two people passing together beneath the windows were indeed happily engaged lovers, and might be taken for such by any unprejudiced observer. They were talking so easily and smiling so happily over their talk, and May's wet face was so full of affectionate sympathy, that Rosie's acute perceptions were deceived.

"So after all I have got Harold to myself," she said; but, although she ought to have felt very glad of it, she was only annoyed and infuriated at the sight of her rival's content.

Rosie felt balked of half her triumph.

"I will see if I can make her feel yet," she said, savagely to herself, as she looked after the retreating couple; "she shall hear of my success from my own lips. Oh! how I hate her!" and the lovely face became

distorted by evil thoughts till scarcely a trace of its beauty could be seen.

Lady Harriet's voice calling to her disturbed her. She went obediently, thinking as she went: "Soon I shall be free from this servitude. I shall have a maid of my own. Oh! how Lady Harriet will stare when I tell her I wish to give warning because I am going to marry Lord Dorrington! I shall tell her in a day or two, as soon as I have said all I want to say to Miss Crocker."

Lady Harriet was a fretful, disagreeable invalid, and Rosie soon found so much occupation in attending to her unceasing requirements, that she had no opportunity that night for maturing her scheme of wreaking further retaliation upon May's innocent head.

The following morning, however, fortune favoured her wishes.

Lady Harriet generally spent two or three hours of the day dozing on the sofa, with the blinds drawn down, and Rosie, during that time, was free to go out or to do what she pleased.

She was by this time pretty familiar with May's daily habits. May spent the greater portion of her days out of doors. Rosie put on her little straw bonnet with its red flowers and went out.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

## ALICE SEES A GLIMMER OF HOPE

YOUNG Lord Dorrington was exceedingly unhappy. He had not dared to tell his mother and sisters of what had come of his visit to Llanvelly. When he had met Alice on the doorstep of his house, as he came back to it alone, mad with jealousy and with disgust at his own folly, he had not been able to summon up courage to tell her what had happened.

"Back again so soon!" Alice had exclaimed, with wondering looks—"and May?"

"Don't speak of her," he had answered, bitterly. "She is lost to me for ever."

And he had looked so stern and so heartbroken that Alice had not ventured to question him further.

He shut himself up in the library, and spent the next two days in useless regrets and bemoanings over his fate. It was only known to them that May and he were irrevocably parted.

"It is a very good thing," said Augusta. "If she has lost her money, what would be the use of Harold's marrying her? Poor dear papa would have been the last to wish it now."

"How can you say that it is a good thing," cried

Alice, indignantly, "when Harold is breaking his heart for her?"

"Harold must get over it," answered her sister, with a shrug of her shoulders. "Have we not all gone through it? Love doesn't kill one; one gets used to doing without it, and one rubs along through life very well after a bit. You must know that as well as anybody, Ally."

Alice sighed. She was not sure whether the process of "rubbing through life" would ever be satisfactorily performed in her own person, but Augusta was right to a certain extent. When a thing becomes hopeless it has to be submitted to. For a woman, at least, there is no other course, but Harold was a man, and could shape his own destiny. Was there any good reason why he should submit to be miserable? Alice could not see it.

"Harold must marry a rich woman, for all our sakes," continued Augusta, who had imbibed many of her father's worldly wise maxims; "it is no time for the indulgence of sentimental feelings. Do you know, Alice, that Mr. Slowcome says that we shall have to leave Dorrington—Harold will be obliged to let it!"

Mr. Slowcome was the family solicitor, and was at that moment closeted with Harold in the library. He came every day and stayed a long time, and after each of his visits Harold became gloomier and more and more absorbed in his own miserable thoughts.

He would be a very poor man; of that there could

be no doubt. He would have to settle his mother and sisters in some humble little country home, and then to let Dorrington Hall, and live as best he could on a very small income. He did not much care how or where he lived; it would have to be abroad, he supposed. But ah! how different from his day-dreams of wanderings through foreign lands, with bright, sympathetic May by his side! May, with her acute appreciation of everything that was good and lovely in art and nature! How she would have revelled in the old pictures, in the cathedrals, and the ruined temples of antiquity; how she would have delighted in the picturesque costumes, the golden sunsets over distant mountains, and the glorious colouring of the shores of the blue Mediterranean. But all that was at an end now. These things would be a dead letter to her who was now to be his companion. What were art and nature to Rosie Wood? A new dress was of more importance to her than a picture by Raphael, and she would sooner look at her own image in the glass than at the fairest landscape that lay under Italian skies! With Rosie he would be an exile indeed.

When Mr. Slowcome left him he came out of the library, and walked gloomily up and down on the lawn outside the windows. Alice saw him from the drawing-room and came out to join him. She put her hand timidly through his arm and looked up at him anxiously.



"Harold, dear, won't you tell me your trouble—is it all about May?"

"Is not that enough to trouble one?" he answered, evasively.

"What happened? Did she refuse to marry you?"

"I did not ask her."

"Not ask her! You did not see her then?"

"Yes, I saw her. I may as well tell you, Alice; I saw her with another man." Harold remembered his sister's old love story—he did not well know whether she still cared for Lionel Denham or not—but he shrank from mentioning his name in conjunction with May. "She is quite happy," he continued; "she has forgotten me—she is engaged to some one else."

"Oh, Harold! I don't believe it. Did any one tell you so! It must have been a mistake. May was too fond of you to get over it so soon. Who told you it was so?"

"It was Rosie Wood," said Harold, in a low voice.

Alice struck her hands together in dismay and horror. "*That* girl!" she cried. "Oh! my poor Harold, then you must have been deceived and cheated! What was *she* doing at Llanvelly? She could only have gone there to work this evil thing to you. It is she who has parted you and May. Wretched, wicked girl! She is the curse of your life!"

"Hush, Alice! You must not say these things of

her, and indeed you do her an injustice. She may have been jealous of May; but she loves me very much."

"*Loves* you! It is Dorrington she loves, not you. It was to be 'My lady,' to be lifted above her station, and to have fine clothes and carriages, that she once tried to make you marry her; and now she thinks——"

"How do you know about all this, Alice?" he interrupted, hastily "I have never spoken about it to you."

"No, but I have known it some time;" and then Alice told him all about the locket, how she had found it, and how she had taken it back, and with what angry, insulting words Rosie Wood had met her gentle reproof and her loving advice.

"You are a good little girl, Ally," said Harold, patting the hand that lay on his arm, when she had finished her story; and then he groaned: "But what is the use of talking about it? It is too late now, and what is done can never be undone again."

"What do you mean?" cried Alice, with a new and sudden terror at her heart. "What has been done? Oh! Harold, you have not told me the worst, I know! For pity's sake, tell me all. What have you done?"

"I have promised her again that I will marry her," answered Harold, in a low voice.

Alice wrung her hands together like one distracted.

"I don't know how I did it. I think I was mad

with misery and jealousy about May. I don't think I could have known what I was saying. It seemed to me that she loved me—Rosie, I mean. It is no excuse for my folly, I know; but it is done now, and I must stick to my word. Oh! Alice, will you break it to the mother? I *dare* not tell her, and it must be told her somehow. Will *you* tell her?"

He took his sister's hands entreatingly within his own.

"What! and break mamma's heart, Harold? Not I!" cried Alice, impetuously—"not while there is a glimmer of hope left that you can be got out of this trouble yet."

"There is *no* hope—put that out of your thoughts at once. I am bound in honour to marry her this time. I managed to get out of it before, because of my father; I could plead his authority and his disapproval. But now I am my own master, there is nothing to prevent a marriage of that sort if I choose to make it. Of course, I know very well that neither my mother nor any of you girls can receive her. I could not expect that; it will make my duty harder, but none the less plain. I will not so far forget what is due to any of you as to obtrude my wife upon the ladies of my family. I shall take her away abroad; you shall not be troubled with her in any way. I suppose I may come as a bachelor and see you now and then?"

"Harold, don't talk in that dreadful way; you will

break my heart!" cried Alice, wildly. "I tell you, you *shall* not marry her!"

"I *must*. I cannot throw her over; it is impossible, even if—if May herself were to come back to me—if—if it were all false what I have fancied about her, even then I could not give up Rosie Wood."

"But she might give *you* up," answered his sister; and suddenly a thought came into her head.

"*She!* never!" cried Harold; and laughed aloud in bitterness and scorn. "My dear child, you do not know her."

"But if she *should*—if, for instance, she were to write you a letter, and resign you utterly of her own free will, you would make no further attempt to marry her then, I suppose?"

"Of course not. But you are talking nonsense, Alice; such a thing is about as likely as that a miracle will be worked in my favour. That girl has a will of iron; she loves me, and she has never forgiven me for throwing her over before. She hates May, no doubt; it is only natural that she should; but her love for me, such as it is, is the one steadfast and good point about her. She will never give me up of her own free will, Alice; it is mere folly to imagine it. You do not know her."

"I am not sure that I don't know her better than you do," answered Alice, musingly; and then she put up both her arms round her brother's neck and kissed him. "Dear, darling old Harold! don't despair

yet. I do think I see my way to pulling you through this slough of despond. No, I am not going to explain. I have not quite matured my own ideas; but do *nothing* for two or three days, and tell nobody; and if you are to be saved, Harold, your sister will save you."

Her mother's voice calling her from the house cut short their interview, and Alice left him hurriedly, full of her new hopes and projects, and leaving Harold somehow impressed—he did not know why or wherefore—with the notion that Alice possessed some occult power over his destiny, and that in her influence lay his only hope of salvation from the lot which he now dreaded, as much as he had once—long ago, in the days of his foolishness—desired.

Three days passed away uneventfully at Dorrington Hall, and Alice made no sign.

Harold watched her narrowly, and wondered why she was so silent and absorbed in thought, but, save for that, she gave no token of being occupied by his affairs. Was she really doing anything for him, or was she powerless to help him, and was he resting upon a broken reed? Once he tried to question her, but his sister put her finger to her lips, and mysteriously refused to answer him.

"Wait," she said briefly. And Harold was fain to wait.

Only she was unusually anxious to settle about the breaking-up of the family that was to take place

shortly. Some one among their many friends had written to them about a little cottage that was to be had in a neighbouring county, and where it was proposed that Lady Dorrington and her daughters were to settle down for a time at least.

Alice went to see it; it was to be let furnished for a year. When she returned in the evening they found she had taken it then and there, and brought the agreement of the lease in her hand for her mother to sign. It was quick work, certainly; but Alice argued that what had to be done had better be done at once, and certainly the sooner the wrench of leaving home was effected, the better for all of them.

Lady Dorrington and the two elder girls went away to stay with relatives until the cottage could be got ready, and Alice volunteered to remain with her brother to help the agent with the inventory, and to superintend the division of the things that were to be sold from those that were to be kept.

As soon as Lady Dorrington had departed, the house was advertised to be let on long lease, in the *Times* and in the local papers, and there were papers posted up all over Wormington, and even in Dorrington village, to that effect—big-lettered placards, that made Harold's heart sick as he passed them. It was for the issuing of these bills that Alice had been waiting. No sooner were they printed than she took several of them, one of the lease of the house, another for the sale of the horses and carriage, and another

for that of some part of the furniture, which was to be sold by auction ; and, putting them all together in her pocket-book, she announced to her brother her intention of leaving the house for one night.

Lord Dorrington looked at her in surprise.

“ Going away, Alice ? What is that for ? Are you going to leave me now, of all times ? ”

“ Only for one night, Harold,” answered Alice ; “ I will be back to-morrow.”

“ Where are you going ? ”

But Alice would not tell him that, and Lord Dorrington would not commit himself by guessing, although he knew instinctively where it was she was going.

“ It is a wild-geese chase,” was all he said, shrugging his shoulders impatiently ; and Alice answered :

“ Perhaps ! ”—and went.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

“ I HAVE COME TO ASK YOU AGAIN.”

MAY CROCKER came out of the Miss Denhams' house on the Green, looking happy and full of excitement. It was the morning after her discovery about Lionel and Alice, and she had lain awake all night thinking about it, and wondering what she should do.

Major Denham had gone out immediately after breakfast, down to the reading-room at the bottom of the High Street, and May had promised to join him there in an hour's time, for their daily walk.

Since his departure in the morning a brilliant idea had occurred to her, which she was eager to impart to him. She was so delighted at the prospect of bringing her two friends together again, of clearing up all their misunderstandings, of being instrumental in making them happy together “ever after,” as the story-books say, that she wilfully blinded herself to the revival of her own hopes, which unconsciously, and unacknowledged by herself, had taken place at the same time as Lionel's. For it seemed to her that Harold must have been so indignant with her heartlessness and unfeeling conduct in not offering her sympathy



to his mother and sisters upon their loss, that it almost, if not entirely, accounted for his silence, which she now interpreted into well-deserved anger and disgust.

May had made up her mind that, for Lionel's sake and Alice's, of course—she reiterated to herself—only and solely for their sakes—she would not write, but she would put her pride in her pocket and go to Dorrington herself to see her friends in their trouble, and explain to them the reason of her silence. She would start off at once to-morrow by the early train; she would ask for Lady Dorrington, and she would see Alice, and tell her about her old lover, and get to the bottom of the mysterious cause which had divided her from him so long. She would pave the way for a complete reconciliation between them, and then if she should happen to see Harold at the same time—if Harold should happen to be in the house when she got there—why then—then—who knows what might happen next?

Filled with these thoughts, May stood for a moment upon the cliff, and looked out over the picturesque little rock-girt bay, whilst the sea-breezes, soft and tender to-day with a breath of the coming spring, fanned her cheeks into rosy colour, and fluttered the little tendrils of pretty bright hair upon her forehead.

She turned round and saw Rosie Wood standing beside her.

"Have you forgotten me, Miss Crocker?" said Rosie, with an affectation of timidity.

"Oh! no," exclaimed May, in a strained voice, whilst all her bright castles in the air fell shattered and broken to the ground. "I don't wish to speak to you," she said, hastily, flushing angrily at the recollection of how and where they had last met.

"I am sure I beg your pardon, miss," said Rosie, making way respectfully for her to pass; and then, flinging off the mask, she added vindictively, "I only stopped to ask you if you wouldn't wish me joy. You will be glad to hear, I am sure, that Lord Dorrington came here to see me yesterday, and has asked me to marry him;" and, making her a mocking bow, Rosie let her go by, looking after her with a vengeful laugh of triumph.

How May got past her she never knew. She put up her hand hastily before her face, as though to ward off an actual blow, and then she fled like a hunted creature from her enemy. It was the second time that Rosie Wood had thus stricken her to the heart.

Somehow she got down to the end of the street, and saw Major Denham standing outside the reading-room waiting for her.

When he saw her pale and frightened face he flung away his cigar, and stepped forward to meet her.

"I can't walk with you to-day. Don't question me—let me go," she said brokenly, and left him standing there in the street.

She took a quiet road that led away from the sea, among narrow lanes bordered by overhanging trees, right away into the heart of the country, where there was no chance of her meeting any one.

Here, at last, in a lonely spot, under the shelter of a bank of woods, over which a tender, budding green was already creeping, May sank down, exhausted and panting, upon a bank by the roadside, and burst into bitter tears.

It was all over then—all over between Harold and herself; he was lost to her for ever. Ah! how cruelly her deception had rebounded upon herself—how fatally the test of her supposed poverty had demonstrated the true character of his worthless love! May, poor, was no longer worth having, and so he had returned to his first love—to that village girl with the beautiful face and the coarse vindictive soul.

If her rival had been different from what she was, poor May thought she could have borne it better. If she had only been a lady, or even if, though low born, she had been some good, pure-souled girl, who cared for him truly and devotedly, and who would be likely to make a sweet loving wife worthy of him, May could have resigned him with a lighter heart. But how give him up to that low, designing woman, whose face was worthy of admiration indeed, but whose character seemed to her to be absolutely detestable—how give him up to such a one as Rosie Wood and not be heart-broken! For May had instinctively

fathomed the mean and base motives of Rosie's conduct.

And now, alas! it was impossible to her to carry out her scheme of helping Lionel and Alice. Her self-respect would not allow her to go to Dorrington Hall now, to see her place there usurped by another woman, and that woman Rose Wood. Poor Alice! she, too, would have to suffer, for May was powerless now to help her.

By degrees her tears subsided from their first violence; she wept no longer, but she sat there quite still by the roadside, crouched upon the cold, damp grass, with her face hidden between her hands, whilst now and then a long, shivering sigh broke from her.

Her whole life seemed to pass in review before her—her life which, in spite—or perhaps by reason of—the wealth which surrounded her, had proved to be so empty and valueless. It seemed to her as though she was marked out by her money to be for ever unloved. Ah! what a curse it was! "Better far," cried poor May aloud to herself in her misery—"better far for a girl to be branded with deformity or disease than to have that fatal word 'heiress' written down against her name; to condemn her for ever to a loveless life, and to find the sweetest fruits of hope and affection turn to dust and ashes between her teeth."

She held up her tear-stained face to the grey clouds above her as she cried out her protest against her fate, but there was no sound or answer to her cry, only the

distant break of the waves upon the shore, and the sighing of the wind among the trees behind her.

She laid down her face again in her hands.

Far away along the road there came the measured sound of a horse's feet in the distance coming ever nearer and nearer. But May was so absorbed in her own miserable reflections that she heard it not—not till there was a tramp of hoofs and a dash of wheels close by, which suddenly came to a dead stop in front of her.

Then she looked up sharply, startled and confused, and somebody—a voice she knew—called out her name:

“Miss Crocker—May!”

And she saw Lord Alforth springing hastily to the ground from a dog-cart, flinging the reins to his groom as he did so.

“What is the matter? what makes you sit out here in the cold? Ah! you are in trouble; you have been crying.” Then to his servant in a louder voice: “Walk the mare slowly on, John, till I call out to you to stop.”

The man obeyed.

May had risen with some difficulty from the ground, for she felt cold and cramped from sitting so long, and stood before her quondam lover with some confusion in her downcast face.

Dolly held her hand, and though it was certainly natural that he should shake hands with her, he did

it so persistently and so repeatedly in his perplexity and disturbance that May, always keenly alive to a sense of the ludicrous, was suddenly struck with the comedy of the situation, and began to laugh.

"Ah! that is better," said Lord Alforth, with a sigh of relief; "there, you look more like yourself now. It was dreadful to find you sitting here crying by yourself by the roadside, like a—like a tramp," added Dolly, rather feebly, being somewhat at a loss for a more elegant simile.

At which May laughed again, and began wiping away the traces of her tears somewhat shamefacedly

"I am very glad to see you, Lord Alforth," she said; "but what on earth brings you here?"

"Why, you see I was stopping with some people near here—about ten miles off, that is—only came down yesterday; and I've got a sister, Lady Harriet North, stopping at Llanvelly, at the hotel; perhaps you've met her? No! Ah! well, she's an invalid, and—and I thought I would do the civil, you know, and drive over and look her up. She might be huffy, you know, if she heard I was in the neighbourhood and hadn't come to see her."

All this somewhat elaborate explanation Dolly stutted forth rather incoherently, whilst employed in nervous researches after his eye-glass, which had got twisted round and was now hanging straight down his back. Having, at length, satisfactorily recovered it, he wound up his remarks by sticking it ferociously

into his right eye, fixing the gaze of that somewhat watery feature firmly and scrutinisingly upon his companion. There was a moment's silence.

"You are in trouble, May," he said, suddenly, with ill-concealed emotion. "What is it? Let me help you?"

"Oh! Lord Alforth, you can't help me; no one can help me. But you are very kind to me," she added, gratefully, for there was something about the little man's genuine disturbance which, in spite of his diminutive stature and comic appearance, touched her strangely.

"But I *can* help you, for I know what is the matter," persisted Dolly.

"You know? How? What do you mean?" stammered May, reddening.

"It is about your money. I heard about it; you have lost your fortune. I mean, of course, that your father has—I have heard he is ruined. Of course you are unhappy, and I am so sorry for you—and that—that is the reason I came."

"Is it—why?" said May, bewildered and very much amused by this new view of her troubles, and charitably forbearing to remind him of the fiction concerning Lady Harriet North. "And supposing that is the cause of my unhappiness, why should it be a reason for your coming to me, Lord Alforth?"

"Why? Oh! don't you remember, May—don't you remember what you said to me when I was up at

Fearn Castle? Don't you remember, when I told you I should want to marry you though you had not a single farthing, how you answered me: 'When I have not a single farthing you may ask me again.' Have you forgotten it? And now I have heard that your engagement with Dorrington is all off, and that you are poor and ruined—and so—and so I have come to ask you again—and—and that's just the long and short of it," added poor Dolly, with all his big heart collapsing naturally into the habitual simplicity of his language.

As to May, she could not answer him for her tears. Do you not suppose that she was struck to the heart with shame and self-remorse? She who had called all men base, and worldly, and money-loving. She who had just been weeping and wailing over her fate because no man could love her without her accursed money? In that moment, whilst poor Dolly stood trembling and anxious before her with the tears in his little eyes—eyes that were neither lustrous nor beautiful, only those of a true-hearted, honourable man, do you suppose that her conscience did not reproach her for having cried aloud with King David, in her haste and bitterness: "All men are liars."

And then and there May Crocker's heart was forever softened and touched; never again in her life did she judge of others hastily and uncharitably, or impute to them base motives without a shadow of proof against them. Only it did seem so hard to her



that the lesson should be taught her by Dolly Alforth and not by Harold Dorrington! It made Harold's faithlessness so much more hard to bear in contrast to the devotion and constancy of heart of this poor little Earl, with his weak eyes, and his stammer, and his limited brains, but with a noble heart that was all too big for his body!

How May told him of all her gratitude and regret; how she managed to let him know that she thought him dear and good, and yet that she could never marry him; how she managed to convey this in flattering, soothing words, that yet neither ruffled nor over-saddened him; history deponeth not. Only certain it is that Lord Alforth, after a short space of time, devoted to tears and wringing hand-grips on both sides, hallooed to his servant, sprang up again into his dog-cart, and, turning his mare's head round again away from Llanvelly and Lady Harriet North, drove off whence he came, with eyes so blinded and blurred that May's image was all blotted out before them as she stood there pale and silent, waving her white hand to him as he disappeared from her sight among the windings of the narrow Welsh lanes.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### ALICE WINS HER BATTLE

“Is there a young person staying here of the name of Wood?”

“I think there is—would you mind stepping behind the bar?”

The Honourable Alice Dorrington, slightly amused at the extremely novel situation in which she found herself, followed the lead of the rosy Welsh chambermaid at the “White Lion Hotel,” to whom she had addressed her question, and “stepped behind the bar.”

There was nothing objectionable in the place to which she was introduced—nothing but the pretty landlady and her sister-in-law, chatting and flirting across the counter with two or three young men who had lounged in through the open hall-door, and were now leaning idly over the counter exchanging pleasantries with them.

The bar at the “White Lion” was the fashionable resort of the *jeunesse dorée* of Llanvelly.

Alice addressed herself to the landlady, repeating her question.

"Wood—Wood?" said the lady, turning half round in her occupation of pouring out a tumbler of bright sparkling cider for a customer. "Let me see. Ah! yes, to be sure, the lady's-maid to No. 20—Lady Harriet North's maid. Is it her you will be wanting, miss?"

Alice, truth to say, did not rightly know, but she said yes at a venture, and requested that Lady Harriet's maid might be sent for.

"Is there any room where I could see her alone?" she asked.

The landlady opened the door of her private sitting-room, a dingy little apartment opening off the bar-room, and ushered the lady in, shutting the door upon her.

A few minutes, which nevertheless appeared to Alice to be ages, elapsed, then the door opened again, and Rosie Wood entered.

She came in quickly and unsuspectingly; but when she saw who it was, she stopped short between the door and the table, looking startled and defiant.

There was a minute's pause. Alice, it must be confessed, was trembling violently. She had felt brave enough before, but now she found herself a sad coward. She had come on a mission to save her brother from a marriage with this woman; but when she actually found herself face to face with her she hardly knew how to declare it. Rosie was the first to speak.

“Have you come to me from Lord Dorrington?”

“I have come from Dorrington,” said Alice, evasively.

“Have you anything specially to say to me?”

It was Rosie who was bold and defiant, Alice who was timid and hesitating. Rosie had scented the impending battle instantly; but Alice, who had come to declare war, shrunk from the storm she was about to evoke.

“I have come to tell you very bad news about all of us—about my brother in particular.”

“Indeed?” very politely.

“I don’t think you can be aware, Rose Wood, of the troubles that have come upon the family since my poor father’s death.”

“Am *I* one of the troubles, Miss Alice?” questioned Rosie, smiling serenely out of the confidence and security of her position.

Then Alice got angry, and with her anger her courage rose also, and she fought her battle, too, the better for it instantly.

Yes,” she answered, “undoubtedly you are one of the troubles. Of course it is a trouble to us that you should imagine that Lord Dorrington can marry you.”

“*Imagine!*” repeated Rosie, arching her brows. “I should not have said there was much imagination about it. I *am* going to marry Lord Dorrington.”

“I don’t think you will,” answered Alice; and the

decision in her voice had the effect of somewhat cowing her antagonist. "You have not yet heard," continued Alice, more calmly, "all I have to say to you. You do not know, I daresay, that Lord Dorrington has become a very poor man?"

Rosie lifted her head sharply, and looked at her eagerly.

"No, I know you have not heard it. We are very poor indeed. My father's affairs were found in the greatest confusion; Dorrington Hall is to be let, the furniture to be sold, and so are the carriages and horses, and my brother will have to go abroad and live upon a very small income. I do not think you would gain much by becoming his wife!" added Alice, with an irrepressible ring of scorn in her voice.

She had hit home this time; Rosie's face had crimsoned with emotion.

"I do not believe it," burst from her angrily. "It is not true, not one word of it; it is a trick you are playing upon me. You have invented it yourself. It is a trap you women have laid to catch me, to make me give him up. But I won't give him up—no, never, never!" she added, passionately, striking the palms of her hands together.

And then Alice brought out all those printed bills from her hand-bag, and laid them on the table between them, flattening them out with her hands, one by one, as she spread them before her. There they were,

every one of them, in their big staring black-and-white capital letters.

“Look for yourself. Do you think there is any trick or trap about these papers? You are welcome to keep them and to find out if there is. I have brought them for you. See here, there are the dates and the names of the agents for the different sales. Do you suppose we could have invented all this?”

Rosie bent over the table in a sort of despair, turning the bills over frantically, and examining them all over; and there came to her a conviction that Alice had got the better of her. What was the use, if all this were true, of her marrying Harold?

Alice had fathomed her aright. It was for no love of him she had desired to be his wife; she had never loved him from the first; she did not, perhaps, rightly understand what the verb “to love” meant. It was a faculty left out of the composition of Rosie Wood. What she did know was, that Harold could give her the thing she coveted—what she had desired to marry him for was to live at Dorrington; to drive past her old friends and relatives in the village in her own carriage, dressed in rustling silks, with jewels round her neck and arms; to see the people touching their hats and dropping their curtsies to her; to be condescending and even gracious to them; to dispense her charities and her favours to them; to be Lady Bountiful, in short, where she had been only little Rose Wood, the labourer’s daughter. These

were the utmost flights of poor Rosie's ambition, all that her little mean soul had hankered after. Nothing worse, if nothing better. She had been ready to sell truth and honour for this poor end. It was contemptible, and yet it was all in all to her.

But, as she bent over those fatal placards, she had sense enough to see that her game was lost. It was not worth her while to marry Harold to be taken abroad for years where nobody would know her or appreciate her grandeur, not even for the sweetness of being called "My lady." If her union with Harold were not to bring her the things which she desired, it would surely bring her no other compensation. Rosie knew that she had lost her power over her lover—he admired her still, but he loved her no longer.

Whilst these things all rushed rapidly through her mind Alice had not been idle; she had taken a pen and a sheet of paper that lay on the table, and she had dipped the pen into the ink.

"I want you to write to my brother, and I shall take him the letter. I am going home again to-morrow, and you are to write what I tell you to him, so that I may take it."

Then Rosie burst into tears. How she wept, and how she bewailed her lot; how she reviled Harold and all his belongings; and how she prayed that he and all his family, and Alice in particular, might be rewarded according to their evil deserts, it would be

needless to relate ; but the end of it was that, at Alice's dictation, she wrote the following letter :

“ MY LORD,—

“ I write to resign all claim to being your wife, and to release you from all your promises, both written and spoken, that you would marry me ; and I will never again remind you of them or ask you to renew them.

“ ROSE WOOD.”

Alice took the letter from her hand, and folded it up and directed it.

“ Now you will give me my brother's letters to you,” she said—“ the letter in which he promised to marry you.”

“ I have never kept it,” answered Rosie, and in all her discomfiture she could not help laughing aloud at the image of straw by which she had frightened them all so long. “ I tore it up at the time ; I often wished I had had it really. I have one you can have if you like, the one he wrote from Scotland.”

She went upstairs and fetched it, and Alice tore it up then and there before her eyes.

After that the interview was at an end ; Rosie said her mistress's bell was ringing for her, and Alice told her she could go.

“ Good-bye,” said Alice, not unkindly. “ Try and do your duty in the station of life in which God has placed you, and do not allow vanity and the love of money to lead you astray again.”



Rosie murmured an inaudible reply, and left her.

Alice Dorrington never saw her again. She was glad afterwards that her last words to the girl who had caused such trouble and confusion by her fatal beauty had been words of kindness.

Alice took a bedroom at the hotel for herself for the night, and then went out. She went to the post-office and telegraphed to Harold:

“Have got a satisfactory letter. Come down to Llanvelly at once.”

And Harold, when he received it, though he felt bewildered by its meaning, gathered at least from it that Alice was straightening out the tangled web of his life for him. He thought it best to obey her, and started off by the afternoon train for Llanvelly.

## CHAPTER XXX.

## A FATAL WALK

No sooner was Rosie left alone than she began to repent of what she had done. It flashed across her suddenly that she ought to have made one effort more to retain all the good things she had toiled so long to obtain. She said to herself that she had given up the game too soon; that she had been too easily convinced that all this tale of ill-fortune which had befallen the Dorrington family was indeed true; that these sales of property were indeed a necessity. How would it be if she could persuade Harold to give up his plans of retrenchment, and to consent to live on at Dorrington, quietly, perhaps for a year or two, to economise and so avoid altogether the necessity for going abroad? Even thus, Harold would be worth her while to keep--a poor lord was surely better than David Haythorn, or remaining a lady's-maid to the end of her life. Why had she been so weak and so poor-spirited as to write that letter? Why had she given up her just rights so easily?

Oh! if she could only see Harold first before that letter reached him! Would she not surely be able to

strengthen the chains by which she held him! When she was away from him, her influence was lessened, and Alice was able to persuade him into anything; but if she were to be with him again, would she not be able to win him again to herself? She would cast her arms about his neck, and put up that face whose beauty he had never known how to resist. She would tell him anew of her love, her devotion; she would entreat him to be guided by her; to give up this odious letting of Dorrington Hall, to live there quietly and in seclusion with herself in the happiness and contentment of her love. Surely—surely she would know how to prevail over him! Ah! if she could only stop that letter!

Then suddenly it came into her mind that Alice was going to stay at Llanvelly for the night, and was not going home again until the following morning.

Rosie determined that she would steal a march upon her, and get back to Dorrington that very night, and so see Harold in the morning before Alice went back.

She stole up into her bedroom and put a few necessities together in a bundle, and then, saying no word either to her mistress or to the people at the hotel, she crept forth alone by back ways to the station.

But when she got there a disappointment awaited her—the last up train in the day had already gone; the next did not leave till the following morning.

“Was there *no* way of getting on—say even as far as Gloucester?” asked Rosie, frantically; for, now

she had made up her mind to go to Dorrington, she felt half distracted at being thus baffled at the very outset.

Yes, the porter told her. There was an up train which left the junction in rather more than two hours' time. If she could drive to the junction, she could go by that.

Now the junction was nine miles off. Rosie's finances were but slender; they did not admit of her engaging a fly for herself; and drivers at Llanvelly were given to charging fancy prices for their services. Moreover, flies were only to be ordered at the two hotels, and Rosie did not intend to return into the town; to do so would be to risk the discovery of her flight. Decidedly, a fly was utterly out of the question.

But there was no reason why she should not walk. She was a country-bred girl, strong and active; nine miles would be but a good long trudge to her. She made up her mind that she would walk to the junction. Only she did not know her way, and if it were necessary to scramble across country she would infallibly lose herself, and be too late for the train.

A solution of the difficulty presented itself to her; she would walk along the railway line. In this way she could not fail to go by the nearest and most direct road.

She left the station and followed the high road for a little while until she was out of sight of the town;

then she scrambled up the steep railway embankment and got upon the railway, walking along quickly and easily between the rails of the up line. There were no more up trains that night, so that she knew she could not possibly be in any danger. She had nothing to do but to walk on until she came to the junction.

It was now getting dusk ; the country lay grey and indistinct on each side of her, the distant Welsh hills lay flat and low in the evening light, the evening wind sighed wearily around her. Still she trudged on, carrying her bundle, with a steady, even pace, never pausing to rest or to take breath, looking neither to the right nor the left, only keeping her eyes ever fixed before her upon the parallel iron rails that lost themselves in the gathering gloom in front of her.

At that very moment her mother was trimming the little oil lamp in the cottage at home, and her father was smoking his pipe in the chimney corner, and honest-hearted David Haythorn was leaning up against the kitchen settle opposite, asking for news of Rosie.

“ Ah ! Rosie ’ll come no more, my lad,” said her father, removing his pipe from his mouth and shaking the ashes out against the bars of the grate ; “ she’s too fine to be content with the likes o’ us poor folk, nowshe be turned own maid to a fine lady.”

“ Ye should not say so of your flesh and blood,” remonstrated the mother, standing up for her absent

child ; "the girl's not to blame because the gentlefolk take notice of her."

"Anyways, she'll never be for me," said Haythorn, with a groan.

"No, no ; put that out of your mind, David. Our Rosie would never be a good wife to a poor man. I don't advise you to think of her ; besides, she's a right to look higher with her looks."

"Ay, ay," assented the old man, "it's her looks as 'll be the making of her."

"Or the undoing !" interrupted David, bitterly.

"Nay—she's too much sense for that, has our Rosie," said the mother ; "she knows how to take care of herself. She'll be marrying some well-to-do tradesman in Wormington some of these fine days, you'll see. You put her out of your mind, David, not but what we should have liked ye well enough for a son-in-law, if she'd been another kind of girl ; there's nobody in all the village we should have liked so well, but there ! the girl's looks is against her putting up with what is good enough for her father and me."

"Ay, it's her looks that has got her on in the world," said the father, for they were proud of her, these two old people, who missed her nevertheless from their humble home. If it had pleased God to give them a daughter like their neighbours, simple, homely, and home-loving, perchance at their hearts they would have liked it better ; nevertheless, as it was not so, they were proud of her as she was. But David

Haythorn knew that she would never be for him, that his heart's desire was to be in vain, that his life's love was to be wasted for evermore.

He bade the old couple good-night, and sauntered out alone into the gathering twilight. He thought of her much as he walked slowly down the village street—of her beauty, her saucy ways, her dainty clothes so neatly and trimly put on, and then he thought again of her flightiness, her love of flirting, and her hankering for the society of her betters.

Mrs. Wood was right, such ways would never suit a labouring man. She was made of too delicate a material to be a good wife to a poor man. No, after all, perhaps it was as well; and Polly Barrett, whose face was freckled and whose hands were coarse and red, but who could earn her seven shillings a week at any time in the fields, would be a more suitable wife for him.

Meanwhile, Harold Dorrington was being borne rapidly away in the express train towards the Welsh coast, and Rosie Wood was toiling along slowly and painfully to meet it.

It is getting very dark now. Rosie can no longer see the fields, and the woods, and the distant hills. She can only distinguish just the hedge or the bank as it may be, that borders the line on either side. She is getting tired now—she had forgotten how long it is since she has had the habit of long walks, and she is surprised to find how fagged and footsore she is

becoming. She is beginning to wonder whether she will ever reach the end—ever get to the junction at all; but she tries to keep before her mind what she has at stake, and she plods on bravely and perseveringly, in spite of the gloom and the fatigue.

By-and-by she passes a signal-box, with red and green lights gleaming high above her head. She cowers closely down in the shadow, lest the man in charge of them should see her. After a while the friendly lights are left behind, and she presses on again, once more alone in the darkness.

All at once she perceives that she is in a deep cutting, so deep that she can hardly distinguish the pale track of the sky between the steep, dark banks on either side; before her all is vague, and dark, and indistinct. But suddenly she comes up to a black, yawning chasm that gapes frowningly before her, as it were, out of the very middle of the earth. It is the mouth of a tunnel!

Rosie stopped short, horror-struck. She had not counted upon this. No thought of having to go through a tunnel had crossed her mind; she felt paralysed with fear. For a few minutes she debated within herself whether she should not turn back even now and retrace her steps, it seemed to her so dreadful to have to go through this depth of great darkness. And then she chided herself aloud for her fears; was she going to turn coward now at the last? she asked herself angrily—now, when surely she must have come



more than two-thirds of the way? After all, what could happen to her worse in the tunnel than in a cutting? She had but to keep well to the side of the wall, and nothing could hurt her; was she a child, to be frightened of the dark?

Thus reasoning with herself, she plucked up her courage and plunged boldly and swiftly into the tunnel. She would give herself no time to think or to turn back; she walked hurriedly on till her retreat was cut off; till it was as dark behind as before her. She touched the wall with her hand as she walked, to keep herself straight along the up lines. Then there comes a suffocating stench of gas that never escapes, of smoke that is never blown away; her eyes smart, her breath is choked by it, but still she presses on bravely. It cannot last long, she thinks—ten minutes at the longest; and then the fresh air from the further side must begin to reach her.

Suddenly, the silence is rent by a fearful, piercing shriek, and a deafening roar as of thunder booms through the hollow void of the tunnel. Volumes of smoke pour towards her, choking and half-blinding her as they come, and away through the thick horror of smoke and darkness there gleam two fiery eyes coming ever nearer and nearer towards her. A train had entered the tunnel on the further side.

Who can describe the horror of that moment? It seemed to her in her bewilderment that she stood on the wrong lines, that somehow or other the train was

coming to her upon the up lines. In her terror she rushed wildly from one side to the other, screaming madly, despairingly, agonizingly, till at length she knew no longer which was the right and which was the left. I will not dwell upon that dreadful moment—the sickening terror, the maddening despair, the agony of fear that was a foretaste of death itself, whilst the monster that rushed upon her came remorselessly onwards, snorting out fire and smoke. Then there came a crash, a deafening roar, one wild scream, that was never heard in the uproar, a slight jolt, and the express train rushed on out of the tunnel again, beyond into the silence of the night, bearing Harold Dorrington on his way to Llanvelly.

But of Rosie Wood no one ever heard again. Only, a week later some workmen employed in mending the line found a poor disfigured crushed-up mass of garments huddled up against the side of the tunnel, where it had been flung, and a bundle in a coloured silk handkerchief, whose contents were identified by Lady Harriet North as having belonged to her missing lady's-maid.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

## HOW SHE WON HIM BACK

ALICE DORRINGTON had found out May's address by inquiring at the stationer's shop in the High Street—that identical stationer who wrapped up his parcels in old sheets of the *Times* newspaper.

When she was told that a young lady named Miss Crocker was staying at the house of the Miss Denhams, on the Green, Alice had started at the sound of that once familiar name.

She desired to be guided to the Green, and wended her way slowly thither.

"I wonder whether it can be any relation," she mused to herself as she went. "It is odd to come across that name again. But how foolish I am to feel upset by such a trifle; of course there must be lots of people called Denham in the world; why should my heart beat in this silly way? I must be a very ill-regulated young woman!"

May had gone up to her bedroom to dress for dinner—dinner took place at an unfashionably early hour at the Miss Denhams. She leant out of her bedroom window and looked idly forth across the bay, and

seemed in no hurry to divest herself of her morning garments. She felt rather sad and lonely; she was thinking about Lord Alforth—and almost, not quite, regretted that she had sent him away from her so ruthlessly.

A woman is never so near to loving the man she has refused to marry as immediately after his rejection. In nine cases out of ten if a man had but the pluck to return instantly to the charge, he would find the judgment against him already reversed.

So May thought about poor Dolly, and half wished him back again. After all, he, at least, had loved her, and had she not told her mother long ago that whenever and wheresoever she should find that real and disinterested love which she yearned for, there and then would she bestow herself in marriage? Yes; but then there was Harold to be thought of—Harold, who, because he believed her to be poor, had deserted her, and gone back to his village love, from whom only the dazzle of her own wealth had been able to lure him.

“Let him return to her, then!” said May, in her bitterness; and then she tried to pray that he might find true happiness with the woman he loved.

All at once she caught sight of Alice Dorrington coming up the slight incline of the road towards the house. May could hardly believe her eyes at the sight; but it was Alice, sure enough. What had she

come for? Her heart beat, and her colour came and went rapidly at this unexpected appearance of her lover's sister. Then suddenly another thought rushed into her head—*Lionel!*

He was downstairs alone in the back drawing-room—he had not yet gone up to his room. The Miss Denhams, whose toilet was a much more lengthy affair than that of either of their guests, were safely closeted in theirs. May flew downstairs and caught the maid just as she was going to open the door in answer to Alice Dorrington's ring.

"It is a lady to see me," she said to her. "Show her into the drawing-room, and tell her I am dressing, but shall be down in a few minutes if she will not mind waiting." And then she ran upstairs again, and seated herself on the top step of the staircase, so that the Miss Denhams could not come out of their rooms without her knowledge.

The little drawing-room was divided into two rooms by an arched doorway, screened off by heavy *portière* curtains. Lionel Denham—who by virtue partly of his recent illness, and partly from his being the sole representative of the nobler sex in the establishment, was a very pampered and spoilt personage in his sister's house—had stretched himself out at ease on a low couch in the inner room, intending to go up and dress by-and-by—when some of the ladies came down probably—for his dressing was but a very short proceeding. Meanwhile he was dozing. It was getting

dusk—too dark to see to read, and yet not dark enough for candles.

Presently, he heard the door of the front room open, and the soft rustle of a woman's dress.

It was May, he supposed, come down from dressing; he yawned and stretched up his arms, and then he asked a question aloud about the time, but received no answer; after that it is to be imagined that he must have dozed off again, for the next thing that Major Denham recollects being conscious of, was an old air softly played on the piano in the adjoining room. The air was "Barbara Allen."

Now Lionel Denham knew almost by heart every tune and every note in Miss Crocker's collection of music, and he was very sure that he had never heard her play "Barbara Allen" before. If she had done so he must have noticed it, for Lionel had particular reasons for remembering that old song. When the first notes of it rang out softly through the half-darkened room, waking him up thoroughly as they did so, he jumped up hastily and listened wonderingly.

All at once he seemed to be back again in the drawing-room at Dorrington, on that last evening when she had played "Barbara Allen" to him in the summer twilight, when last he had seen her—the woman whom he had always loved. He seemed to see her once more in her white dress; to hear the soft accents of her voice; to watch the blushes on her downcast face, as he had bent over her by

the piano, and had whispered to her fond, foolish words—alas! how foolish!—whilst she played. Was it likely that Lionel Denham would ever forget that air?

But what made May Crocker play it? he wondered to himself, and then stepped noiselessly forward into the front room.

Some one sat at the piano—some one in a black dress; but the light was dim, and the corner was shadowy, and he could not distinguish who it was. He still thought it was May; it did not occur to him that it could be anybody else.

He came softly up to the player and stood silently behind her. She did not speak or look round, or pause in her music. She went on playing the same quaint little old tune, in an under-key, over and over again, so persistently and so untiringly that it struck him at last that she had a purpose in so playing it.

Then all at once he bent down and laid his hands upon the hands that wandered softly over the keys of the piano, and stopped them.

“Why do you play that?” he said, and his voice was hoarse and trembling. “What makes you play it? How have you found out that that air is for ever bound up with the woman that I have loved? You must know it, or else why do you play it to-night? Do you know that when I hear it, it rings through my soul like a sound of my past life; it brings her back to me so plainly that, as I hear it, I

forgive her all—all her cruelty and heartlessness to me. I can remember nothing against her—nothing but her sweetness and her charm. My anger against her dies away. The heart that I thought I had closed for ever against her opens once more to her, and I love her again as dearly as in the old days long ago—gone now, alas! for ever.”

Then out of the darkness there came a broken sob and a smothered sound of weeping, and a voice, well-known and dearly loved, that cried out to him :

“ Oh ! Lionel ! my darling—my darling ! ”

Two arms, soft and clinging, came suddenly about his neck, and a dark head nestled close upon his bosom. And thus it was that she won him back again—the lover of her youth.

He asked her no question at first—not one ; he only held her close and kissed her passionately, knowing that he had forgiven her, and that she loved him still. But by-and-by he questioned her :

“ My darling, how did you come here ? It is miraculous ! What made you play that old tune ? Did you know I was in the next room ? ”

“ Yes,” she answered, smiling at him amid her tears ; for he had lighted a candle now, and could see her. “ I knew this was Miss Denham’s house, though I did not know she was any relation of yours. I had come to see May ; but when I was waiting for her, I heard some one in the next room, and you spoke, do you remember ? You asked what time it was, and I



knew your voice instantly. Do you suppose I could ever forget it? And then I thought what I could do. I could not speak and tell you that I loved you still; that it has all been a horrible mistake between us; that I have always loved you the same. I could not *speak* all this. How is a woman to do so when a man is justly angry with her, and will not be likely to give her the chance of saying these things? But I wanted to let you know it, to soften your heart to me; so I thought of that old tune you used to be fond of. I thought if I played it you would remember it—you would know that I loved you, and would come to you still if you would only say again that you loved me; and, you see, you did say so, sir, although you thought you were saying so to May."

"Tell me about it all, my Alice," he said, wondering still what it was that had parted them; and Alice told him about the letter she had found after her father's death, and its answer.

When she had told her story they were silent. In their new-found happiness it was not in either of them to cast a word of blame at the old man who was dead, and whose grave sealed their lips for ever from speaking evil of him.

"We will never speak of it again," said Lionel. "The past shall be dead to us; it is enough for us to be thankful for the present."

And so these two people sat on in that state of

unreasonable and insane happiness which lovers all the world over believe to be more intensified in their own case than ever was before, or ever shall be after. They sat there, very close together, on the sofa, utterly regardless of time, or place, or dinner, or any other rational consideration, until May suddenly burst in upon them.

"Well," she cried, excitedly, "is it all right? Oh! yes, I see it is. You needn't start apart in that guilty fashion, because I know you have been kissing each other shamelessly; I saw you plainly as I came in. Oh! Alice, my darling, I *am* so glad!" and May proceeded to hug her friend, and in her excitement and delight I am not quite sure that she did not hug Major Denham also—a proceeding to which that gentleman made no objection whatever. "The old ladies are coming down," continued May, breathlessly. "Of course, Alice, you must dine here. Come up to my room for a minute and smooth your *very* ruffled hair. Major Denham, I am ashamed of you for making her so untidy."

On the way up they encountered Miss Letitia Denham.

"Oh! Miss Letty," cried May, "I am the very happiest girl on earth."

"My dear child, I knew it—I knew it," answered the good lady, kissing her rapturously. "You are going to tell me that you are engaged to Lionel. I foresaw it all along; and may Heaven's blessings——"

“Not a bit of it, Miss Letty,” laughed May, dragging the blushing Alice forward by the hand; “*this* is the lady Major Denham is engaged to, and you must bless *her*, please—she is my greatest friend. He has loved her for years; and I have known all about it ever since I have been here.”

## CHAPTER XXXII.

## FOR HER OWN WORTH

NEITHER was this the last event of this eventful day. Whilst the little party at the house on the Green were gathered around Miss Denham's dinner-table, there came a sudden sound as of a vehicle drawing up to the front door, followed immediately by violent thunderings on the knocker.

"That is Owen Williams' knock," cried Miss Letty. "Who on earth can it be at such an hour?"

Now Owen Williams was the special flyman, who was in the habit of meeting the trains at the station.

Alice thought she knew who it was, and blushed, saying, however, to herself:

"But how unlike Harold, to have driven up in a fly. He would have been far more likely to walk!"

The opening of the front door was followed, however, by so much noise and commotion that Alice felt immediately convinced that it could not be her brother.

The little party in the dining-room was silent, listening wonderingly.

"Who *can* it be?" whispered Miss Denham.

"Why," cried May, half-rising from the table, "it is mamma! I hear her voice."

The door was flung open, and, to the intense surprise of every one, in came Mr. and Mrs. Crocker, radiant with smiles and delight. The worthy couple fell upon their daughter, and half suffocated her with their rapturous embraces.

"Here we are safe and sound!" cried Mr. Crocker, in his loud, hearty voice. "How d'ye do, Miss Denham? Don't you be frightened, we aren't going to take up our quarters here; we engaged rooms at the hotel on our way. You see we thought we'd give you a little surprise; we came back three weeks sooner than we intended, settled all my business up, and hadn't time to let May know. Just caught the next ship back, and thought we'd come straight off from Glasgow and see our little girl as fast as we could. So here we are, you see, and very glad to be home again, I can tell you—ain't we, Mary? There's nothing like old England, after all."

"We didn't even stop to send our boxes to Fearn Castle; just left everything at Glasgow, and came straight off. Oh! Miss Denham, it's been very good of you to keep May all this time; and how well she is looking, too! I can tell that she has been happy with you;" and May was again gathered to the portly maternal bosom.

But Major Denham and Alice Dorrington were looking on at this scene of family happiness in a

condition of bewilderment easier to be imagined than described.

Was *this* the ruined bankrupt who had had to fly the country from before the face of his creditors—this fat, jolly, hearty old gentleman with the round, red face, and the loud laugh? Could it possibly be that this man, upon whom the imprint of “success” in this world’s good things was so plainly stamped, had nevertheless so lately lost the whole of a very large fortune? and this jovial old lady in violet silk and sables, with feathers nodding in her Paris bonnet, and big diamonds twinkling in her ears, was she the unhappy partner of his flight and his misfortunes? What on earth was the meaning of it all?

May was chattering, and laughing, and kissing her parents delightedly, utterly oblivious of the complication to the situation which she herself had afforded to two of the lookers-on. As to the Miss Denhams, they, of course, had never been made victims to her little fraud, so that they were not in the least surprised or bewildered; the whole thing was perfectly simple to them. Mr. and Mrs. Crocker had gone away to America “on business” of a vague character, but presumably the business was of a nature to increase rather than diminish their wealth, and now, having satisfactorily concluded it, they had come home sooner than they intended, and had hurried off eagerly to see their only child, to give her, as they themselves termed it, “a surprise.” There was

nothing at all wonderful or mysterious in the situation to Miss Denham and her sister.

Mrs. Crocker was dying to know whether May had not "made it up" with her lover; but, of course, before her husband, to whom she had observed a strict secrecy concerning the quarrel, she could say nothing.

By this time the whole party had moved into the drawing-room. Mrs. Crocker had divested herself of her sables and the befeathered bonnet, and had seated herself on a sofa with her daughter, and was clinging on to her by both hands, as if afraid she would run away from her if she let go for one minute. Mr. Crocker was descanting to the two Miss Denhams upon the discomforts of American hotels and the advantages of American railway cars. The lovers had retired into the shelter of the back drawing-room together, where they were talking to each other about their extreme astonishment at the incomprehensible appearance and bearing of May's "impoverished" parents, together with sundry other topics of conversation wholly irrelevant to the family meeting which had just taken place, and entirely uninteresting to anybody in the whole world save themselves.

At this juncture there came a very modest rap at the front door, which nobody heard, and the next minute "Lord Dorrington" was suddenly announced by the maid, and Harold himself walked into the room.

A general astonishment followed. Mr. and Mrs. Crocker, who had not heard of the late lord's death, hardly understood how Harold came to be ushered in under the name of his father. The Miss Denhams were naturally a little flustered at the appearance of yet another uninvited guest in their tiny house.

May started to her feet, blushing and confused, hardly knowing whether to be glad or indignant. Lionel Denham came forward and shook Harold by the hand, and introduced him to his sisters, and Alice fell upon her brother's neck and kissed him, whispering as she did so :

"It is all right. I have got the letter from Rose Wood for you."

She did not know—they none of them knew—of that terrible fate which had already befallen poor Rosie Wood on that very evening ; they did not hear of it for days afterwards.

Mr. Crocker was shaking hands with Harold, and Harold was looking from one to the other with bewilderment. He could not understand the presence of May's parents any more than could Alice and Lionel.

And then he turned to May—holding out his hand to her—and before them all he spoke out what he had come to say to her.

"May, are you not going to shake hands with me ? Will you not forgive me all the misunderstandings of the past two months, and let this miserable time of



separation and unhappiness end? If I have offended you, will you not forgive me when I tell you that I intend to shake myself free of the things which gave you offence, for ever. And if you have lost your wealth——”

Here Mr. Crocker uttered an exclamation, and made a step forward; but Alice, to whom the whole truth of it became suddenly revealed as though by inspiration, put up her hand to stop him.

“If you are poor, May, I also am, alas! a poor man, and can offer you nothing but my love. Can you—will you—be happy with me in poverty? I know quite well that I am not half good enough for you; but perhaps you will believe me when I tell you again what you have disbelieved of me of late, that it is May, and not May’s money, that I have thought to be worth winning.”

May, blushing like a rose, with downcast eyes and hands locked together, stood before him, and heard him to the end; then she turned suddenly round and cast her arms about her mother’s neck, hiding her happy face upon her bosom.

“Oh! mother—mother!” she cried, half weeping and half laughing, “I thought he was like all the rest; but, after all, he loves me for myself, and—and I needn’t marry Donald the keeper now!”

After that there was a general dispersion of everybody. The elders wisely felt that the young people must be left alone altogether to ask and give the mutual explanations of the past. Mr. Crocker went round to the hotel, his wife was carried off upstairs by the two maiden ladies, and the two couples of lovers were left together.

It would be needless to enumerate the questions and the explanations that followed. How May confessed to having deluded them all with that fiction of her father's ruin solely and simply to see whether Harold would love her in spite of the loss of her fortune; how Harold told her about Rose Wood's fatal influence over him, and how Alice produced the letter which was written by that damsel under her dictation; also how Lionel Denham denied stoutly that he had ever been engaged to May, or to any other woman in the world save Alice Dorrington; and how Alice herself told the sad and simple story of the disappointment of her early life. All this and much more was talked of between them, and it was only at a very late hour that the house on the Green subsided once more into peace and tranquillity, and the two young men escorted Mrs. Crocker back to the hotel, leaving the young ladies with Miss Denham, Lionel having given up his room to Alice.

There is little more to say. May, of course, went back with her parents to Fearn Castle, and at her earnest desire the whole Dorrington family migrated

north, and the double wedding took place from there as soon as Easter was over.

Lord Dorrington, having won his May and her money too, gave up all idea of letting Dorrington Hall, or of selling any portion of his property or belongings; on the contrary, he was enabled, thanks to his wife's wealth, to settle down there with every comfort, and to live in an infinitely better style than either his father or his grandfather had done before him.

Major and Mrs. Denham have bought a small property about two miles off, so that there is no end to the goings to and fro which are continually taking place between the Hall and the Grange, as their house is called, and Alice and May, although in that very ticklish relationship of sisters-in-law, continue to be as great friends as ever.

The Miss Denhams have left Llanvelly, and have taken a small house on the outskirts of Wormington, and are the most devoted of maiden aunts to Lionel's two little boys, whom they spoil remorselessly. There are great entertainments to the children; tea-parties, and Christmas-trees, and magic-lanterns, in which May's three children also take part, at the little villa outside the town, which the good ladies have renamed "Llanvelly Lodge."

Mr. and Mrs. Crocker still live at Fearn Castle, although they pay long visits twice a year to Dorrington Hall, after each of which Mr. Crocker, on

his return north, talks every year with greater pride and pomposity to his Scotch neighbours about “My daughter, Lady Dorrington, and my grandson, the Honourable John—called after *me*, sir!” a harmless little exhibition of vanity, for which nobody ever thinks of owing him a grudge.





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